ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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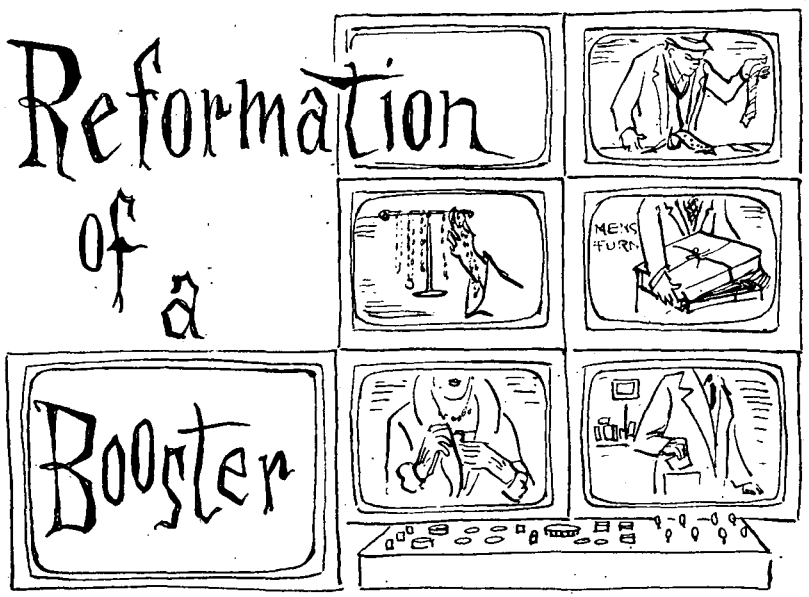
One may find credence, indeed, in Mr. Chetkos' tenet that confusion has freed more men than innocence.

Reformation of a Booster



I HAVE TO see you, Stoneman," said the hesitating, sniff-punctuated voice.

Snuffles Grogan had been of unmatched help in the past, asking little in return, and if he wanted to see me, I was glad to oblige.

"Only a lawyer can help," said Snuffles.

"Okay," I said. "Where do you want to meet?"

"Make it Grip Kelly's bar. I'll be waiting."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I promised.

I hung up. It was only two days before Christmas and things were rather dull around the office. Court calendars had been cleared until after the holidays and Chetkos was talking about a deep-sea fishing trip to Bimini during the next week.

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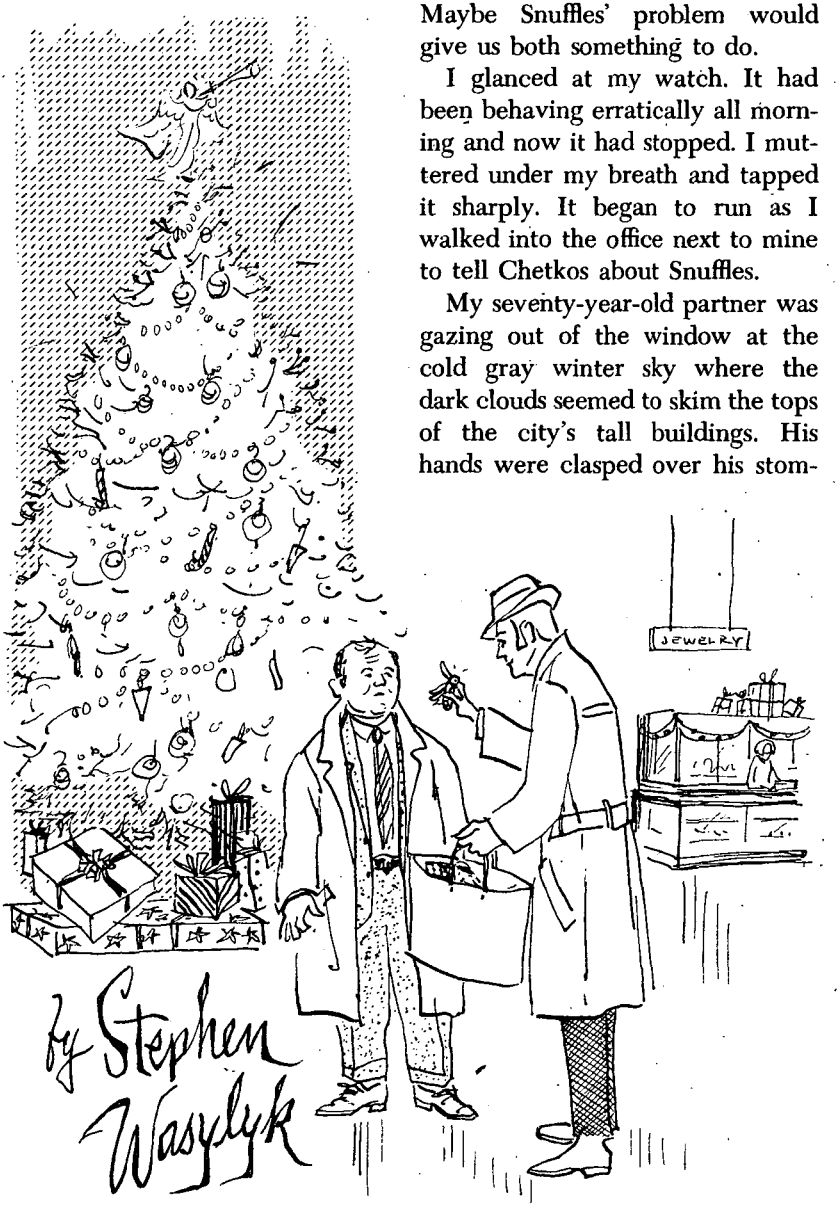
Maybe Snuffles' problem would give us both something to do.

I glanced at my watch. It had been behaving erratically all morning and now it had stopped. I muttered under my breath and tapped it sharply. It began to run as I walked into the office next to mine to tell Chetkos about Snuffles.

My seventy-year-old partner was gazing out of the window at the cold gray winter sky where the dark clouds seemed to skim the tops of the city's tall buildings. His hands were clasped over his stom-



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ach and he was listening to the FM set I had given him the year before, nodding in time to a softly playing carol.

"Starting to enjoy Christmas early?" I asked him.

"Not really," he said. "I have a problem."

"You, too? I just talked to Snuffles Grogan. He has the same complaint."

"What did Mr. Grogan have to say?"

"Nothing much except that he wants me down at Grip Kelly's Bar and Grill as soon as I can make it. What is your trouble?"

"The annual party at the children's home is tomorrow and I still have not acquired anyone to play Santa."

"The committee stuck you with that assignment?"

"To my regret, I volunteered. I had intended to produce the best Santa the children have ever seen but it hasn't quite worked out that way. Each of the people I had in mind turned me down."

"Any idea of what you are going to do?"

"I was about to call on you for suggestions."

"I'll give it some thought," I promised.

"We need a man for tomorrow," he warned.

"If I don't find someone, I'll strap a pillow to my stomach and play the role myself. Right now I am on my way to see Snuffles."

There was a chill in the air and a bitter wind whipping through the streets. It didn't seem to faze the shoppers, but I was happy I didn't have far to go.

Grip Kelly had been a rather good flyweight boxer in his time, which had been some forty years before. He hadn't quite made the top, but he had made money and, what was more important, had invested it wisely. One of his investments was a restaurant at one of the busiest corners in town. It had done well, although it had become a meeting place for many of the shadier characters. The food was good and the service fast and the characters gave it an atmosphere all its own. Time and the police had thinned out the hangers-on, but it was still the unofficial meeting place for many whose everyday activities were slightly shady, so I wasn't surprised when Snuffles Grogan specified it.

Snuffles was in a booth at the back of the bar, nursing a beer. He was a small man with thinning hair, long sideburns and a soft pudgy face that looked like an unfinished sculpture.

I pointed. "Early for that, isn't it?"

"They don't let me sit here for

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nothing," said Snuffles. "You want one?"

"I'll have coffee," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"Not what," he said. "Who. Fatdog is in trouble."

"Again?" I asked. There was nothing unusual about Fatdog being in trouble. He had appeared on the scene from out of town a few years before and already had compiled an arrest record for minor offenses that kept him in jail more often than he was free. It was rumored that Fatdog had been an over-the-road truck driver who had lost his wife and his nerve. It might have been, but one thing was sure. Fatdog was now a perpetual loser who lived by his wits from day to day.

Except for Snuffles, people steered clear of him, afraid that some of his bad luck would rub off. Yet I had hopes for Fatdog. I had the feeling he was in some kind of private limbo and would someday snap out of it.

"Not his fault this time," said Snuffles. "Fatdog was framed."

The waitress brought the coffee and I sipped thoughtfully. "Who would want to frame Fatdog?"

"The store dick at the department store up the street. Herb Anderson. He picked up Fatdog boosting a pair of men's slacks a few months ago. The judge let Fatdog go because Anderson grabbed him too soon and couldn't prove that Fatdog wasn't going to pay for them. Anderson swore to get Fatdog someday."

"I didn't know that Fatdog boosted merchandise."

Snuffles looked uncomfortable. "That's been his big bag lately."

"You mean he's a shoplifter, among other things?"

"You don't understand. When he needed something, how else was he going to get it?"

"The way everybody else does. Pay for it."

"With what? You know Fatdog is mostly broke."

"So are many other people, but they don't steal."

Snuffles scratched his head thoughtfully. "I never thought of that. What do they do?"

"A great American custom called time payment," I said drily. "For a dollar down and a dollar a week you can buy almost anything."

"You're kidding," said Snuffles.

"Not really. What is he supposed to have taken?"

"A man's gold watch from the jewelry department."

"What was he doing in the store in the first place?"

Snuffles licked his lips. "I don't know if I should tell."

I stood up. "I might as well leave."

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"Sit down," he said testily. "It's just that Fatdog doesn't want anyone to know."

"Know what?"

"That his kid daughter is coming to visit him for the holidays. He wants to play it straight for a week, pretend he's taking time off from a job he doesn't even have. That's the story he's told the people who take care of her. Sends them money each month." He sighed. "Funny thing was, he was in the store to buy some toys for her legit, when Anderson busted him. I know. I lent him a few bills."

Snuffles' disjointed story said a great deal about Fatdog. About the only thing I'd known about him was his real name. I didn't know he was supporting a daughter. Now his frequent brushes with the law became clearer. He had to come up with a given sum every month and he didn't care how he got it, which was probably the reason for his shoplifting. Why he never took a legitimate job was something else I didn't know, but I didn't intend to ask. Each of what Chetkos called my disreputable clientele had a story like Fatdog's buried somewhere in his past, and we got along well because I never asked questions.

"Why worry?" I asked. "His daughter will be in town for only a few days. Fatdog will be out on bail and she doesn't have to know about it."

"No," said Snuffles, reaching for his handkerchief. "Fatdog goes up before Judge Pulaski at three this afternoon and he won't get no bail. Judge Pulaski put him on probation last time and if he sees Fatdog again, he'll just put him in the slammer. You have to get him off or the daughter has no papa to meet her."

I groaned. "How do I do that?"

"You're the lawyer," Snuffles pointed out. "Figure an angle." He leaned forward. "Fatdog's my friend, right?"

"Right," I said.

"How is it going to look if his kid comes to town and he's in jail and I don't do nothing to keep it from happening? Fatdog won't never speak to me again."

"Maybe he won't," I said drily. "I'd hate to be the cause of a beautiful friendship breaking up, but Fatdog should have thought about it before he started stealing." I finished the coffee, and suddenly felt guilty. After all, it was Christmas. "All right," I said. "But if I get him off, you promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You make Fatdog get a job and stay out of trouble."

"How am I supposed to do that?" asked Snuffles mournfully.

I couldn't resist. "Figure an angle," I said.

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I left the comfortable warmth of Grip Kelly's for the cold street and paused outside, wondering what to do next, until it occurred to me that the logical thing was to get the story straight from Fatdog so that I knew exactly where I stood. I wouldn't want to appear at his hearing this afternoon and be surprised by anything that might happen.

An obliging sergeant brought him to the interview room. Fatdog looked little the worse for wear after his morning in a cell. His suit was wrinkled, but then it always was, mostly because it was almost impossible for him to get one to fit. Fatdog was about five and a half feet tall and weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds, which gave him a somewhat round appearance and the reason for his name. Usually his eyes danced and his cherubic face was good-humored in spite of whatever trouble he was in—except this time.

Now he looked worried.

I told him that Snuffles had sent me.

"He's a good friend," he said, "but I don't know what you can do."

"First, tell me all about it."

"Nothing to tell," he said. "I went to the toy department and bought some things. I was on the way out when this store dick stopped me. He looked in my shopping bag and found the watch. I don't know where it came from."

"What made him stop you?"

"I guess because he did it before," he said, embarrassed.

"Snuffles told me about that."

He changed the subject quickly. "Did he tell you about the kid?"

"He did."

"If it wasn't for her . . ." He hesitated. "Do you think you can get me out?"

"I can try." I studied him closely. "I don't care what you did before, but you're sure you didn't take that watch?"

"I swear," he said solemnly.

"Okay," I said. "Look for me at your hearing this afternoon. Maybe we'll be lucky and you won't draw Judge Pulaski."

"Not likely," he said. "I already asked, and he's it."

I glanced at my watch. It had stopped again. I sighed. "Looks like I could use that watch you stole."

"Get me off and I'll get you one."

I threw up my hands. "I was only joking, and I don't want to hear any talk like that. With your daughter coming to town, you'll have to cut that sort of thing out."

Fatdog passed a hand over his face. "I would. If I could only get ahead one of these days . . ."

"I've heard that before."

"I mean it. All I need is a break."

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"I'm trying to get one for you," I pointed out. "In the meantime, keep cool. We have some hours yet."

Outside the precinct station the wind was more bitter than ever. I wondered if paying for the watch would make the store drop the charges. There was only one way to find out. With no cabs in sight, I buttoned up my collar, huddled into my coat and started walking.

The department store was crowded with shoppers, many of them congregated in the center where a huge glittering Christmas tree had been erected and an organ was playing carols, accompanied by jets of water that rose and fell around the tree in time with the music while muted floodlights bathed the scene in changing colors.

The elevator operator directed me to the security office where I found a heavyset man named Vought, who looked like a former cop and probably was. He listened to me quietly, his eyes cold.

"Not a chance," he said. "The insurance company has forced us to adopt a policy of strict prosecution in all cases of stealing. Notice that I don't call it shoplifting. It has become much more than that. We lose millions to these people each year. They're stealing us blind, and we intend to put a stop to it."

"I thought all you had to contend with was a few kleptomaniacs and some light-fingered people."

His eyebrows lifted. "You certainly don't know much about this end of the business."

"Never had occasion to learn."

"Let me educate you." He led me through a long bare room with a wooden bench on one side. "Interrogation room."

I followed him into another room with a bank of television monitors along one wall. A man was seated at a desk, watching the monitors, a radio before him and a microphone strapped to his neck.

Vought waved. "Closed-circuit television throughout the store. Fifty men and women, some in uniform, some in plain clothes, all with transistorized two-way radios, and the thieves have us to the point where we are now using dogs because we never know when one of them is going to become violent."

"Sounds like you're putting up a good battle."

"We're losing," he said. "That's why, when we catch one, we try to lean on him real hard."

"I can't see how one man can make a difference."

"Look. We've been missing a great deal of jewelry. Maybe your friend is the cause of it. Now that we have him, it might slow down."

"But he says he was framed, that

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he really didn't take the watch."

He chuckled. "They all say that. Who would want to frame him?"

"The detective who picked him up. He could be harboring a grudge."

"Forget it. Anderson collars too many who are let go to worry about one man. His only interest in your client would be to spot him as an habitual. In fact, any of our people could have spotted him and alerted the entire staff through our two-way radios."

I grinned. "I don't think I would like to be a shoplifter. Sounds like you'd have me outmanned and outmaneuvered."

"I wish others would have your attitude, but the amateurs don't know and the professionals don't care."

"You'll have to straighten that out for me."

"The amateurs are the light-fingered people you mentioned. They steal because it's easy, because they want something, because they don't have the money to pay right then. They come from the ordinary people, the working people, the housewives, the kids, the businessmen. Then you have the professionals. They steal to make money. Some because it's their way of making a living, some because they need the money for drugs." He sighed. "I couldn't begin to give you all the classifications. As far as we're concerned, *anyone* who walks into the store is a potential thief."

The radio on the desk squawked. "Couple in the men's clothing department with a booster box."

"Ah," said Vought. "Someone looking for a couple of new suits."

"What's a booster box?" I asked.

"A package," he said. "Wrapped but empty, with a slit in the bottom that can be opened and resealed. The booster grabs something, shoves it into the box and closes it again. The woman either decoys the salesperson or acts as a lookout. At least that will be one pair that we stop."

I looked at the radio and the bank of television monitors showing scenes of milling shoppers throughout the store. I had walked into a world I didn't know existed. I had thought that shoplifting was a sometime thing, a petty annoyance to the stores, carried on mostly by impulsive people. I had never suspected it was such a big, organized, and expensive thorn in their side.

"Tell me more," I said to Vought.

"Inside and outside, they come at us from all directions. It's almost as if they feel they have a license to steal. The women stuff things in their bras, walk out wearing two dresses, wrap things around their waists under their coats. They drop

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things into conveniently open umbrellas, use two shopping bags and slip things between the layers. There are as many different ways as there are shoplifters, and someone thinking of something new every day."

He waved at the monitors. "All we can do is keep our eyes open and get as many of them as we can, and it isn't enough."

The radio squawked again. "Roberts and Evans to the toy department."

Vought stepped to the monitor and turned a knob. One of the screens flickered and the picture of the toy department zoomed larger. "We have to be careful of false arrest. I'll have to get up there."

"Go ahead," I told him. "You've taken enough time with me."

I left the store, not envying Vought his job, and walked back to the office. My watch had stopped again and I had to depend on the clock in a bank window to tell the time. The hours were slipping past and I still hadn't found a way to help Fatdog.

Chetkos was still sitting quietly, listening to the radio. A news broadcast was predicting snow at any minute, delighting the hearts of millions who were wishing for a white Christmas.

"What was Mr. Grogan's trouble?" he asked.

I told him, then, about Fatdog.

He grunted. "I thought it was something personal."

"It is," I said. "Snuffles is just about the only friend that Fatdog has."

"What do you intend to do?"

"No time to do anything except represent Fatdog at the hearing, plead him not guilty and try for bail."

"If Mr. Grogan is right, Judge Pulaski may revoke his probation on the previous charge."

"I was hoping to talk Pulaski out of that with a speech about this being the season for goodwill toward men."

He shook his head. "Not Pulaski. He is a very rigid man. He has never been known to do anything for anyone except himself."

"That's a rough judgment."

"He is a hard man. You have never appeared before him?"

"Not in the twenty years we've been in practice."

He frowned. "That presents a problem. I'm sure he has heard of you. To impress you, he will be extremely critical and perhaps more harsh than he should be."

"I wouldn't want Fatdog to pay that sort of penalty. Any suggestions?"

He pondered. "I wonder," he said. "I know Pulaski rather well since he is a contemporary of mine.

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He and I have encountered each other several times. I would not wish to boast, but my presence might incline him toward leniency."

"In other words, it would be better if you defended Fatdog."

"I was leading up to it," he said. "Another thought has come to me. If I take over Mr. Fatdog's defense, it will free you to return to the department store. We have very little time if we are to help Mr. Fatdog, and it will take the efforts of both of us to do so."

I grinned. He invariably had a sarcastic comment concerning my disreputable clientele, but he just as invariably could be counted on to help when one of them found himself in trouble.

"Agreed," I said. "But what can I do?"

"Pursue the truth. Mr. Fatdog insists that he is innocent. If he is, then someone placed that watch in his shopping bag. It would be interesting to know who did it and why."

"Back to the store."

"Exactly. You will make an attempt to ascertain the real culprit. Can you expect cooperation from Mr. Vought?"

"He has already cooperated far more than necessary by giving me a liberal education in shoplifting."

Chetkos smiled. "I don't suppose things have changed much. Do they still use the dressing room switch and the belt loop?"

"Far beyond that now. I'll tell you about it later." I turned at the door. "Fatdog's hearing is at three o'clock. You'll be there?"

"You can count on me."

On the way to the store, I had the feeling that all I had been doing all day was walking and talking, without accomplishing much; learning things, perhaps, but getting nothing done.

I pushed my way through the shoppers to the jewelry department. It was on the street level, tucked away in a corner next to the clock department and the cosmetic counters. The displays were tempting, even though the more valuable items were put away in glass-topped cases.

I circulated through the aisles. Before long, I noticed that a tall, thin man in a tan hat, long sideburns and a brown topcoat was staying very close to me.

I smiled. Vought's security force was on the job.

If surveillance was that strict, I wondered how the shoplifters could manage to work. It seemed to me that losses should be held down here, yet Vought had said the jewelry department was especially hard hit.

Maybe Vought had the answer. I

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joined the crowd at the elevators, not feeling very much in the mood for Christmas, although it was obvious that many of them did.

I found Vought studying the television monitors.

"Did you see me in the jewelry department?" I asked.

"I noticed you," he said. "What brings you back?"

"Curiosity. If Fatdog was framed, and I believe he was, who framed him and, more important, why?"

"Do us both a favor, Stoneman. Forget it."

"I'm stubborn," I told him. "Didn't you tell me the shoplifters were having a field day in the jewelry department?"

"We have lost quite a bit from there without getting any results."

"How?. All I did was tour the place once and a man was on my tail. It seems to me that you have the place fairly well covered."

"You don't know how clever they are. Jewelry is small and there are at least a half dozen ways they can carry it out. We can't stop and search everyone, so we almost have to catch them in the act. You can imagine how hard that is."

"Nevertheless," I said, "you should be doing better."

He stiffened. "I don't think I need your advice."

I smiled. "Don't be offended. As I said, I'm curious. Sometimes an unbiased view is just what you need."

He relaxed. "What did you have in mind?"

"We've talked about outsiders. What about your own employees?"

He grimaced. "One of our biggest problems and just as hard to control, but the salespeople in the jewelry department are especially trustworthy. I'd have to say that we lose very little, if any, inside that department."

"Any way to check?"

"We have checked and rechecked."

"Do you mind if I look it over?"

"Where do you want to start?"

"Just let me hang around here for a few minutes to watch your monitor."

He waved. "Help yourself."

The people milled about on the screen, shuffling through the aisles, some of them pausing before the jewelry display cases. The television camera picked up the tall, thin man who had been following me. He was still circulating, stopping now and then as if he were impatiently waiting for someone. Occasionally he moved to one of the doorways to chat with a uniformed guard stationed there.

Vought's two-way radio system was working overtime as store detectives and uniformed personnel called in suspected shoplifters. I heard phrases I had never heard be-

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fore, the specialized lingo of the shoplifting scene.

"Probably using a dog collar," said one voice. "I'll keep an eye on him."

I tapped Vought on the shoulder. "What's he talking about?"

"A man wearing a leather loop around his neck with a hook on it. He'll pick up something and hang it there under his shirt, leaving his hands free."

I shook my head. "After today, you'll have one more day before Christmas," I said. "I suppose it's worse at this time?"

"Because of the crowds. Some days we run them through the interrogation room as if they were on an assembly line. Things happen to be slow at the moment. The men don't seem to be meeting their quotas."

"Quotas?"

"We assign them as an incentive. They usually have no trouble filling them without working hard. Keeps the men on their toes."

I turned back to the monitor. The tall thin man was still there. I pointed him out. "One of your men, no doubt."

He nodded. "Anderson, the man who picked up your client."

"Seems to make himself rather conspicuous."

"Just a method of working. Sometimes it discourages thieves."

"He has always worked like that?"

"Pretty much."

If I doubted it before, I was sure now: Fatdog was innocent. Knowing Anderson and seeing him watching, Fatdog would never have tried to lift the watch.

Which brought back the nagging question: who had slipped the watch into Fatdog's shopping bag?

Anderson was leaning on a glass-topped case, talking to a young woman salesclerk. He stood there for several minutes before moving to the door.

I turned to Vought. "I take it the people in the jewelry department account for everything at closing?"

He nodded. "It doesn't take long. Even after a busy day, it's relatively easy."

"This goes on in every department?"

He shook his head. "Each department has its own way of operating."

Nothing he had told me brought me any closer to the answer. I went back to the monitor for a final look. Anderson was leaning on the case again, talking to another young woman. If he paid as much attention to his job as he did to the girls, shoplifting in the jewelry department would have to go down considerably.

I glanced at Vought, busy else-

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where, wondering if he had noticed that particular little failing of Anderson's.

A uniformed store patrolman came in and approached Vought. "We caught one," he said. "Using a sleeve sneak."

"I'll be right there," said Vought. He looked up and saw the expression on my face. "There are many variations," he said. "It simply means slipping something up your sleeve. An oversized coat helps."

He left and I caught a glimpse of a small pale-faced man being guarded in the interrogation room.

I went back to studying Anderson and recalled what Vought had said about quotas. Maybe Anderson had been running a little behind that morning and had recognized Fatdog. With his record, Fatdog would be a logical victim.

The more I thought of it, the more sure I became that I was right. Anderson was the only one who could have done it, who would have a reason to do it. All I had to do was prove it and the store would have to drop the charges.

I grinned. If Anderson had planted that watch on Fatdog, he could hardly object if the same thing happened to him.

I studied the monitor. It shouldn't be too difficult. I might know nothing of shoplifting, but one of my clients was an adept pickpocket and had taught me all he knew. The principle was much the same: the hand had to be quicker than the eye.

The elevator to the ground floor, and the jewelry department, were crowded. Looking no different than an ordinary shopper, I pushed my way through the aisles until I found what I was looking for: a display of women's bracelets. My wife had gently hinted that one might be appreciated as a gift, and I hoped I could find one that might please her.

The obliging young saleswoman showed me several. I pointed out another in the case, an intricately woven golden mesh studded with stones. When she stooped to get it, I quickly palmed a simple gold circlet from the counter and casually dropped it into my pocket. It had been ridiculously easy. The harried young woman never noticed it was gone, and someone would have had to be looking directly at me to have noticed anything. Even then he wouldn't have been certain.

I paid for the bracelet that had been in the case and turned away, looking for Anderson. I covered the entire jewelry section before I spotted him working his way through the aisles, his head constantly turning, studying the people. In spite of his watchfulness,

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he had missed me, which was ample proof of how hard it is to control shoplifting.

Anderson paused to let a few shoppers by and I stepped behind him, nudged him and swiftly transferred the stolen bracelet to his pocket while he was off balance. I mumbled an apology and moved away. Now all I had to do was get Vought to search Anderson, which would make my point that Anderson could just as easily have planted the watch on Fatdog to help him make his quota for the day.

Confusion has freed more men than has innocence, Chetkos was fond of saying. I hoped I had created enough.

I found Vought still in the security office.

He grimaced when he saw me. "I thought you had gone."

"I almost am," I said cheerfully. "I was just out proving a point, and all you have to do is cooperate. Can you call Anderson up here for a few minutes?"

"What for?"

"I'll tell you when he gets here. Unless, of course, you don't mind being the cause of an innocent man being sent to jail."

"I suppose I have no choice."

"You certainly do. Just make it."

He looked at me thoughtfully before stepping to the radio. He contacted a guard on the first floor and directed him to send Anderson up.

We waited.

Anderson came in, annoyance written on his face. "You have something for me?" he asked Vought.

Vought waved at me. "Mr. Stoneman wanted to see you."

Anderson studied me for a moment. "You were in first-floor jewelry earlier, then came back. You bumped into me."

"You have a good memory for faces," I said.

"I need it in my job," he said.

"I know. You recognized a man called Fatdog this morning. Picked him up for taking a man's watch."

"A loser," he said. "It wasn't the first time I caught him boosting."

"Except this time he took nothing."

"He had it on him."

"That's simple to do."

"What does that mean?"

I turned to Vought. "I'd like to have Anderson searched."

Anderson turned red. "Not on your life."

"You should have no objection," I said. "I merely want to prove something."

"No," he said. "I'll quit first."

Vought lifted a hand. "Just take it easy. I see no reason why you shouldn't cooperate with Mr. Stoneman."

"Forget it," said Anderson. "I'm

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leaving." He started for the door.

I moved to the door. "Don't do anything hasty."

"No one searches me," he said.

"Why not?" I asked. "If you have nothing to hide, what difference does it make?"

Anderson pointed at me. "You keep out of it."

"He's right," said Vought. "If you have nothing to hide . . ."

"No," said Anderson. "Move away from the door."

I smiled at him. "Not before you're searched."

He lunged at me. I sidestepped, knocked him off balance, grabbed an arm and twisted it behind his back.

"Go through his pockets," I told Vought. "I'll apologize later."

Vought started with his topcoat. The first thing he drew out was a woman's watch. I blinked. I was positive I hadn't put *that* in there. Vought followed it with a collection of rings, pins, necklaces and watches before he found the bracelet I had planted. Anderson had worked hard that day, harder than any of the shoplifters he had been guarding against, and he'd been doing more than talking to the girls when he leaned on those jewelry display cases.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind," I said, "but it still makes my point."

"No wonder the jewelry department has been hit so hard," said Vought. "The last person I would suspect would be one of our own security people, and he knew it. I wonder if there is anyone left I can trust."

I freed Anderson, who stood there, his lips drawn tight.

"You have him," I said. "I guess you'll take care of the Fatdog matter?"

"I'll inform our attorney that the charges are being dropped."

"And that a mistake was made," I insisted.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "Your client will be cleared." He held out a hand. "I appreciate what you have done."

"Thank Anderson," I said. "If he hadn't selected Fatdog, you'd still be in trouble." I looked at my useless watch, then at the wall clock. "Fatdog's hearing is in a half hour."

He opened the door and motioned for a uniformed patrolman. "Take care of him," he said, indicating Anderson. "I'll be with you in a moment and we'll take him down and make the arrest formal."

After they had gone, he picked up the phone. "I'll call our attorney now. I'll need him for this Anderson thing, anyway."

It had started to snow when I left the store and headed for Grip Kelly's. Chetkos and the store's at-

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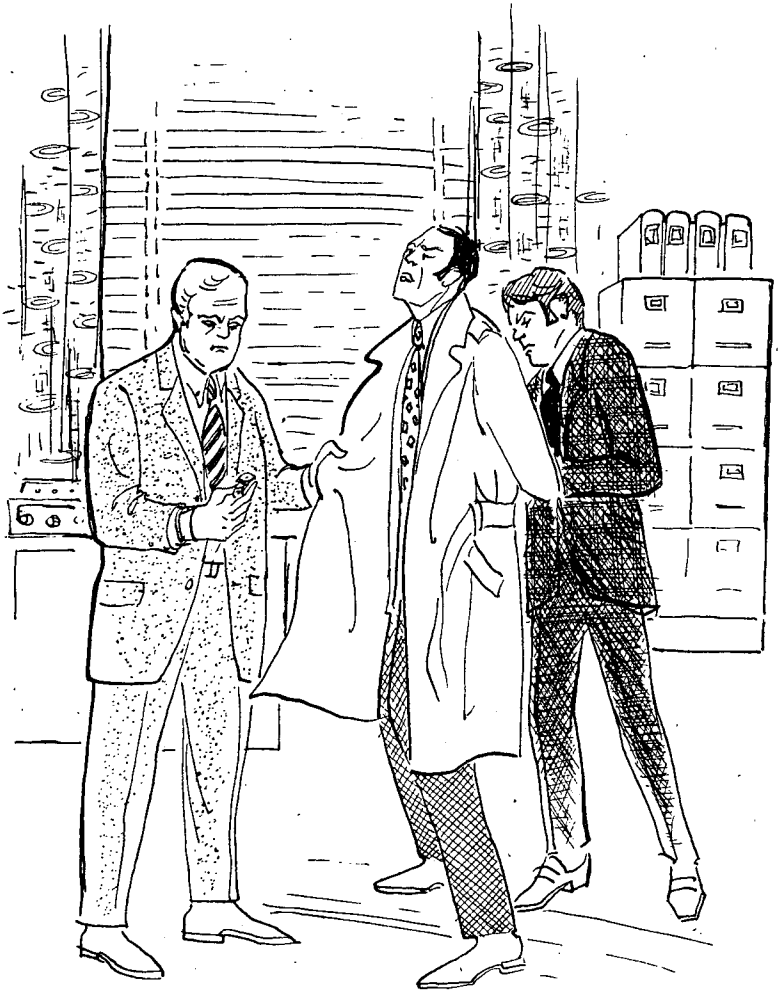

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torney would see that Fatdog was released. They didn't need me, and I knew Snuffles would be anxious to know how things had turned out.

I found him at one of the tables with a pretty young blonde who appeared to be about sixteen.

"What's she doing in a place like this?"

"It's a restaurant, isn't it?" asked Snuffles defensively.

"Maybe," I said, "but this section is no place for a young lady. She should be on the other side, away from the bar."

"Oh," said Snuffles, deflated. He brightened. "She's Max's daughter, Frances. She came in a day early."

I frowned. "Who is Max?"

His eyes signaled frantically. "Max. You know, *Max*."

His rolling eyes jogged my memory and I remembered that Fatdog's real name, never used except in court, was Maxwell Pentecost.

"Oh," I said. I nodded at the young woman. "I know your father. I thought you would be much younger. It seems he bought some toys . . ."

She giggled. "I haven't seen him in years. I guess he forgot that little girls grow up."

"I guess he did," I said.

"I'm not going back," she said proudly. "He doesn't know it yet, but I'm going to stay with him."

"Great," I said. "Glad to hear it." I took Snuffles' arm. "Excuse us for a moment."

I dragged him away from the table. "Why didn't you take her to his room?"

"That's where I found her, trying to get in. Fatdog doesn't want her there. It's a dump in a bad neighborhood. He's going to put her in a hotel."

"Why don't you do it for him?"

"Bread, man. I'm flat. I gave all my money to Fatdog. No hotel is going to let me register a kid like that with no advance."

I pulled out my wallet and slipped him a couple of twenties. "You should have told me."

"I can't take your money, Stoneman. I didn't do nothing for it."

"Call it a Christmas present because you're a friend of mine. Take her over to the Ambassador across the street. Leave word with the bartender for Fatdog."

"Hey," he said, "did you get him off?"

"He's off and, with the girl here, he'd better stay off."

"I'm worried about that. I don't know how Fatdog is going to take care of her. He's got no bread and no young broad can live the way he does."

"He'll just have to reform."

He sighed. "Anyway, he owes you, Stoneman. I'll tell him."

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"Forget it," I said. I escorted them across to the hotel and continued toward the office. It hadn't been such a bad day after all. Chetkos' time had been wasted, however, and I regretted that. He could have used it trying to talk someone into playing Santa for him. Now I'd probably have to do it.

The snow was beginning to accumulate, coating the streets and making driving and walking tricky. I slipped and slid into the entrance of our building and immediately began worrying about Chetkos. His seventy-year-old legs would make it difficult for him to navigate in this weather, and cabs would be hard to get. I decided to wait for him.

I spent an hour worrying and watching the snow deepen in the fading winter light.

A police car pulled up to the curb and Chetkos stepped out, humming a Christmas carol.

"That's great transportation when cabs aren't available," I said.

"Arranged by a friend. Judge Pulaski suggested that the police give me a lift. They obliged."

I grinned. It could happen only to Chetkos. "I take it that Fatdog had no trouble?"

"The store's attorney explained it all. I gathered you had been busy."

In the elevator, I told him what had happened.

"You rendered the store a real service," he said. "They should reward you in some manner."

"Don't speak so loudly," I said. "Let's hope they don't realize that I accomplished it with a bit of shoplifting."

Installed in the leather chair in his office, he pointed his cane at the window where snowflakes whispered and the wind howled.

"Between the weather and our small victory, I would think we have earned a bit of libation," he said. "Will you pour?"

I splashed bourbon into two glasses. "I'm sorry I wasted your time."

"Not wasted at all. You will be interested to know I have found my Santa for tomorrow."

I smiled. "I knew the idea would occur to you once you saw Fatdog."

He frowned. "Not Mr. Fatdog. He will be occupied with his daughter. I would not wish to intrude, even for a few hours."

"Then who?"

"Judge Pulaski. He will need very little padding, and he has a jolly chuckle. He also likes children."

I gaped. "You said he was a hard man."

"A misunderstanding. Off the bench, he is a splendid fellow. In fact, he is going to accompany me deep-sea fishing in Bimini next

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week. While we are gone, you will consult with the store's attorneys for a suitable settlement."

"For a *what*?"

"A settlement to avoid a lawsuit. It occurred to me that Mr. Fatdog had an excellent case for false arrest. The store's attorney had to agree. I leave it to you to arrive at an amount that will be equitable."

"You mean Fatdog has been stealing from the store all along and now you persuaded them to *give* him money?"

"His past performance has no bearing. We are concerned only with the justice of this immediate case. Look at it this way. The store has eliminated two sources of loss: Mr. Anderson and Mr. Fatdog. It will come out ahead."

I downed the bourbon in one gulp and felt for the nearest chair. Things were moving too fast for me. "It looks like Fatdog will not only have a Merry Christmas, but he'll really start the New Year off in style," I said. "I only hope it has some lasting effect."

It was then that Fatdog walked in, his cherubic face wind-whipped and glowing. "I brought you a Christmas present for what you did," he said. "Snuffles said I should." He drew a gold watch from his pocket. "I saw you needed one this morning, so I picked this up."

I groaned. "You stole it?"

He passed a hand over his eyes. "I don't blame you for thinking that, Mr. Stoneman, but those days are all over. I got the watch for a small deposit and promised to pay the balance later. I just couldn't do anything else after seeing my daughter. I have to play it straight from now on because she's too important to me. I don't know why I didn't think of that before. Guess I was just off the track somehow."

I grinned. "Welcome to the world of the average citizen, Fatdog. It sounds like your problems are over."

"Yes," said Chetkos. "He has now joined the rest of us in the great American pastime."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Purchasing things on time. It is far more challenging than shoplifting."

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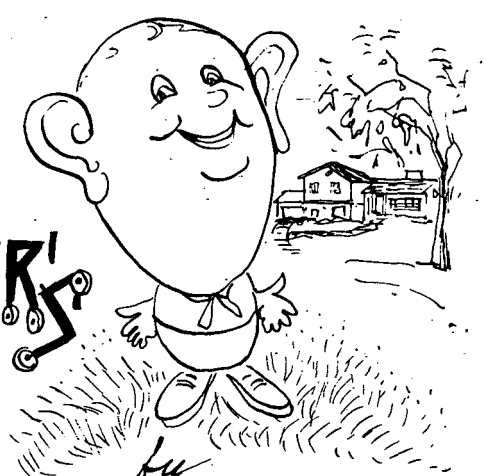
. . . and Neighbor-Dolls come complete with accessory wardrobes including deerstalker and magnifying glass . . .

The Killing of the Toymaker's Wife



by Pauline C. Smith

THERE WAS only one thing to think: Wanda Ravensby had been killed by a prowler.

". . . There was that kid that came around trying to sell those coupon books for a cleaner nobody ever heard of . . ."

"Did the one wanting to do yard work come to your house?"

"How about the furnace man?"

"What furnace man?"

"Something about inspecting and

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cleaning the furnace and putting in new filters. I never buy from door-to-door salesmen so I never listen."

"Have you ever actually seen a prowler?"

"I don't think so. It was Howie Ravensby, wasn't it, talking about a prowler? Telling everybody to keep their doors locked?"

"I didn't believe him. You know how he is. I guess he was serious, though."

Everybody shuddered.

"Maybe the prowler was just around the Ravensbys'. There's all that brush up behind their house. Maybe he was *after* Wanda. Anyway, it sure makes you wonder and all . . ."

"Makes you do more than wonder since they haven't caught him."

Johanna wondered. She had been doing a lot of wondering since the morning she had found the body. It seemed as if she'd been living over that morning every minute of every day since it had happened. Imagine! Trotting over at ten o'clock, same as usual, going through the garage and opening the kitchen door to yell, "Yoo-hoo," into a thick fog of silence. While all the time, back where she couldn't see at first, half hidden by the refrigerator, lay Wanda.

Johanna hadn't believed it, even while she looked at the crumpled body, knowing it was dead.

She must have crept closer, although she couldn't remember having done so, close enough to lean over and see the dark hair matted with blood. She remembered that, all right—how the blood glistened where it had not yet dried.

Clapping a hand over her mouth, she lunged for the phone, Wanda's kitchen phone that hung on the wall, only to wheel and run a distracted course toward the back door in order to escape this dead body and whatever else might be in the house. She cast herself upon the door, sobbing, falling through to leave it swing behind her as she stumbled from the garage and across the street, where she dropped to her knees at the curbing to crawl the lawn before she could pick herself up and gain the blessed safety of her own house.

She phoned the police through the operator, forgetting her own name, forgetting Wanda's, forgetting the address, remembering again in snatches and tag ends so that the whole must have been a confusion of misinformation. The officer on the phone read it back, straightening it out, and promised a patrol car in minutes.

The neighborhood was quiet at ten in the morning, the school children at school, husbands at work, also working wives. The stay-at-home wives must have been laun-

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dering at that hour, making the beds, dusting, polishing the houses that encased them. It was then that Johanna hurled herself at the front door to make sure it was locked, and dashed breathlessly to check the kitchen door. Now *she* was encased and would remain so until the police arrived.

The spring morning was almost summerlike, but Johanna felt cold, her skin lifting in icy lumps, her fingers frigidly stiff as she dialed her husband's accounting office and cried out in shock and terror, running her words together, jumbling the sequence so that she became lost and whimpering.

Ron, bless his serious and mathematical heart, made rapid calculations, adding meaning to and subtracting redundancy from her incoherency, dividing his day's work into tomorrow, and promised to be home within twenty minutes.

Johanna then sat at her picture

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window, waiting for the police and waiting for Ron, waiting for someone to bring life to this terribly dead street.

The Ravensby house directly opposite held a shadowed, lowering look of sorrow in the warm morning sun. Brown and wide-eaved, softened by feathery, well-cared-for shrubs, it was guarded incongruously by an egg-shaped plastic figure whose head nodded smilingly from the lawn in the gentle breeze. Howie had placed it there, an outsized model of a successful nursery toy. Howie had great pride in his creations . . .

"Howie!" Johanna backed a hand against her lips in appalled dereliction. She had forgotten to call Howie and tell him his wife was dead!

She had half turned toward the phone when a patrol car slid up to the opposite curbing, and she was across the room and out the door and across the street even before the two officers had stepped outside their car.

An hour later the street was alive.

A patrol car, an ambulance and two unmarked official cars were parked along the curbings. Howie's Mercedes stood at an angle halfway up his driveway, Ron's compact was in place beside Johanna's VW with the garage door down.

Neighbor women had gathered in knots of curiosity. A delivery truck crept at a snail's pace, its driver hanging perilously out the side. The mailman, spending minutes at a nearby mailbox, moved his three-wheeled truck almost imperceptibly to the next mailbox for another attentive pause.

Johanna, in view of her picture window, with Ron at her side, was answering questions.

Mrs. Ronald Maitland, and I guess we've known the Ravensbys for about four years. That's when they built the house.

I just do. Every morning at ten o'clock I go over to Wanda's. We have coffee and rehearse . . .

Our parts. We're in a play together. Little Theatre. Sometimes we tape-record and listen back.

Yes, the garage is always open and the kitchen door is always unlocked. I just yell that I'm there if she's in another part of the house, and go on in.

Johanna spent a moment to wipe the moist memory from her eyes.

I suppose she unlocks it to let Howie out. He leaves about nine, banker's hours, at least in the morning. The Raven Toy Manufacturing Company is his, down on Center and First.

Johanna broke off to become rigidly still at the sight, across the street, of the covered stretcher

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being wheeled from the Ravensby garage by white-coated attendants. She watched in hypnotic dismay as the stretcher turned from the driveway onto the grass to avoid Howie's car until it reached the outsized plastic toy, smiling and bowing on the lawn, and then clapped her hands over her eyes, seeing Wanda again on the kitchen floor, dried blood still glistening wetly along the edges of her scalp.

Howie took it hard. For once in his life, he wasn't popping a toy gun at someone, or throwing a ball that screamed a mechanical *Catch-me-you-dum-dum*, or pulling rabbits from a kid-magician's top hat.

Howie was no longer the life of the party; being glum, he became its nucleus. The neighborhood rallied in sympathy—all those people who had never really liked him bent every effort to like him now.

He took a motel room in town, but came out daily to water, mow the lawn around the plastic bobbing figure and pick up the mail, whereupon someone, often Johanna, would ask him to dinner.

"You actually *saw* a prowler?" she asked.

"I saw someone. Up in the brush. One evening. And a couple of mornings. Remember? I told you about him."

And Howie had, in the way he had of telling everything: hamming it up, being silly. "Howie Ravensby," Ron once said in exasperation, "is not a toy manufacturer. He is one of his own nutty toys."

"And do the police think it was a prowler?" Johanna asked Howie.

"What else?" he said. "Who else could it be, and how can they catch a prowler?"

The police weren't catching anything. They'd located the kid who was selling the coupon books in another state, having given up the sales job as a bad investment of time, days before Wanda's murder. The potential yard boy was safely in school. The furnace man had been a knotty problem for a few hours, his being an on-the-edge operation, but he had established an unshakable alibi for the time of the killing, being actually under a house on the other side of town, peering up at a floor furnace and trying to figure out how much he could take the customer for.

"Did you see anything out of the usual that morning?" the investigator asked Johanna.

"No," she said. "Nothing. But then, I wasn't in the kitchen after Wanda came home. My kitchen faces the street just like my livingroom does . . ."

"She came home, you say? That morning? What time was that?"

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"Oh, it was after nine. Close to nine-thirty, I'd guess. I was just finishing up in the kitchen and I went upstairs to make the bed and gather up the laundry. Stuff like that. She'd phoned me. Said something about having to go someplace but she'd be back before ten o'clock. She probably thought I'd see her go and wouldn't know whether she'd come back or not. Wanda doesn't drive," explained Johanna, and then caught herself. "She *didn't* drive," she added, "and I suppose she had to get something at the market or the drugstore or somewhere, and Howie took her before he went off to work."

"You saw her?"

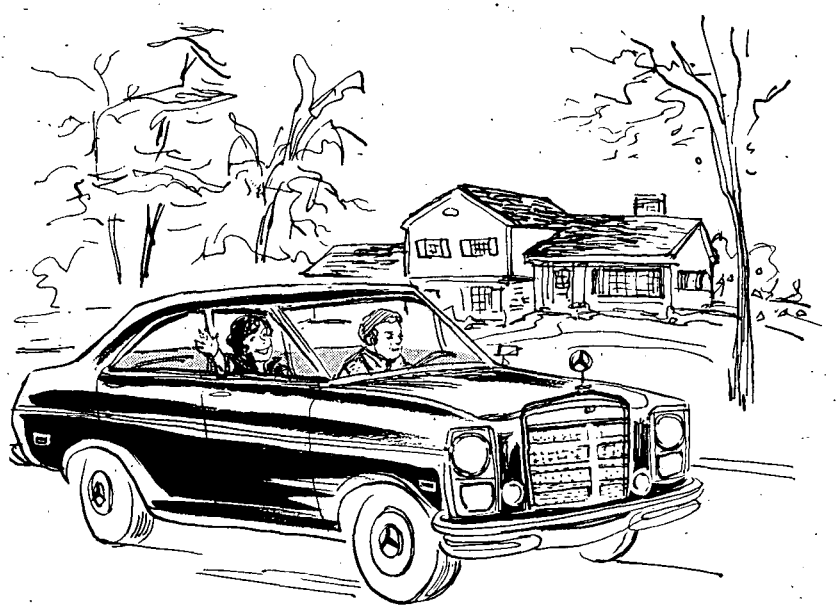
"Wanda? Yes. I was standing at the sink, looking out the windows, and she waved to me from the car and—"

"And you saw her come back?"

"That's the last time I saw her alive," wept Johanna.

"What time was that?" asked the detective.

Johanna dried her eyes and forced herself to think back to the



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morning when Wanda had been alive, had spoken over the phone, had waved from the Mercedes as Howie drove it out of the driveway to turn left, and waved on the way back even though she was on the far side of the car then, with Johanna no longer at the window but over by the kitchen table as Howie drove back to turn right into the driveway. He had entered the garage, pausing only long enough to let Wanda out, then backed down the driveway and gone off to work.

"I told you," said Johanna. "That was about nine-thirty. She phoned me about nine and they left a few minutes later. She was probably not gone more than fifteen, twenty minutes, about the length of time it takes to get something at the shopping center."

The detective nodded. "You crossed the street at ten?" he said.

"Yes," said Johanna, remembering it once more, closing her eyes against the memory, which did not erase it.

"If whoever got in, got in through the garage and the unlocked kitchen door—and it's the only way he could have gotten in since none of the windows or screens have been tampered with—it means he had to walk up the front driveway or sneak from the back and around the garage to the front." He looked at Johanna as if she certainly should have seen *something*.

But Johanna had seen nothing after Wanda returned home at nine-thirty; as she told the detective, she'd gone upstairs to make the bed and gather up the laundry, "stuff like that." Nor had any other woman on the street who was home at the time. Johanna was sorry—she felt a deep sin of omission for having been so unobservant. She felt that if only she had been attentive, she could describe a face, a build, an age, so the police would have something to go on.

As it was, they had nothing, not even fingerprints. She had probably destroyed those on the doorknob; all the others in the kitchen belonged there, and the murder weapon had not been found. The authorities came to the vague and inconclusive decision that the weapon was "some kind of blunt instrument," and a blunt instrument could be anything from a tire iron to a dead log from the brush. Anyway, nothing was found.

Since there had been no robbery and no rape, it was thought in the neighborhood that a homicidal maniac must be at large, which inspired each householder to add bolts and chain locks to every door in his home, and caused the women to shudder through morning and afternoon coffees in morbid con-

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jecture of their personal fates.

The funeral, when the body was finally released, was attended by Howie and the neighbors. "Where are her relatives?" Johanna was asked, being her best friend. "She had none," said Johanna, remembering then a remark Wanda had made during one of their morning rehearsals.

"You know," Wanda had said in half-seriousness, "I think Howie married me because I was alone."

"Huh?" Johanna had said.

"Well, I was young and alone, like an idea, you know?"

"An *idea*?"

"Something unformed. Something he could create. Like one of his toys."

"*Wanda!*"

"Sure. Just as he created that whole family of dolls, the Daddy-Dan and Mommie-Mollie and Sonny-Sam . . ." She'd fluttered her hands in an attempt to explain. "What he wanted was to take me and create me into a Wife-Wanda doll, something that would sit when he told me to sit, and prepare a meal when he wound me up to do it. . . ."

"Wanda!" Johanna laughed thinly in case this were a joke, and with embarrassment because she always thought of Wanda as having no will of her own, no life, no personal motivation. It was why she had made the attempt to interest her in Little Theatre, and was overwhelmed by her shy enthusiasm, as if she were coming alive from the automaton Howie had made of her.

"Howie makes fun of my being in a play," Wanda had said then.

Well, of course—Howie the jokester, the grown-up kid with his toys.

"He works late at the factory now. Every night. He says he's got a new idea. He's creating a new toy. But that's all he says. He doesn't talk about it the way he always has before, showing me the plans and explaining how it works. I'm not his Wife-Wanda doll anymore. I didn't turn out the way he planned . . ."

Johanna had felt a chill clutch her shoulders, not at Wanda's words, but the way she spoke them, analytically, as if she had finally figured out her marriage, deciding she did not like her husband and had not yet passed judgment on herself.

The Maitland daughter, Sue, home for spring vacation from State U., demanded a rehash of the events—step-by-step, she instructed her mother, minute-by-minute; "exactly what happened."

"How dreadful that you should want to know," Johanna cried, thinking that a young and beautiful girl should not be so interested in such a morbid subject, and said so.

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"Mother," answered Sue from the pinnacle of her 3.87 scholastic average. "I am a sociology major which is the study of problems of people living together as social groups. If I am interested in sociology, believe me, I am interested in a very morbid subject. The same with psychology, my minor, another morbid subject. So tell me, Mother, did Wanda Ravensby ever let anything out about a former husband, maybe, who was out for revenge, or a lover-gone-mad somewhere in the background . . . ?"

"Sue!" Johanna was shocked.

"Mother, more murders are committed by lovers and rejected husbands than by prowlers any day of the week."

Johanna had a feeling that Sue had made up the vague statistic on the spot, but it caused her to wonder aloud at the Wife-Wanda story . . . "Such a strange thing to say . . ." and Sue to pounce upon it as an immediate clue.

"So okay," she said in triumph, theorizing that Wanda had broken out of her shell and taken a lover, probably someone from the cast of the play.

"Don't be silly," said Johanna. "There are only two men in the play, one an older man who, I'm sure, is past such hanky-panky; the other younger, who seems to be gay," blushing at what she had said and angry at being on the defensive.

"It would *have* to be a lover," Sue stated with erudite certainty, "someone who could work up enough passion to kill. Can you imagine Howie Ravensby becoming violently emotional to the point of murder over anything but one of his *toys* . . . ?" She stopped suddenly, staring at her mother while both recalled Wanda's doll-wife hypothesis. "Remember what she said? How she hadn't turned out the way Howie planned. Wouldn't that drive him to destroy her?"

It was exactly the type of theory an imaginative student of sociology would come up with—psychologically complicated.

"But physically impossible," said Sue's mother, pointing out Wanda's presence in the car.

"And mathematically unsound," added Sue's father with a reminder as to time sequence.

"Are you *sure* it was Wanda in the car?"

"Absolutely," said Johanna, not feeling absolute at all, but remembering, in a haze, the upraised arm upon leaving, still upraised upon returning . . . and wondering about that, not knowing why she wondered. "Anyway, I heard her voice. Remember? Her voice on the phone that morning."

"Are you sure it was her voice?"

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questioned Sue of her best witness.

"Positively," said Johanna, feeling positive only that the voice was Wanda's, but uncertain as to the words and the way the words were spoken. There had been something wrong with the telephone call, something very wrong which Johanna could not define at the time, and could not clearly remember after all the tragedy.

The play, of course, was canceled out of respect for the dead, and during the first meeting following the murder, it was decided not to rehearse another this season. None of the cast except for Johanna had really known Wanda, because there was little about Wanda to know; but each member recalled something, dredging deep to offer a verbal memorial.

"She was so sweet," said one.

"And quiet," said another.

"She was turning out pretty good in the part too, and I never thought she would."

"Oh, me neither. That voice of hers! It was a monotone. But she managed to get expression in her lines after all . . ."

Now Johanna remembered the telephone call and Wanda's voice—breathless, hurried, without salutation as it spoke of leaving, going somewhere; only to change tone abruptly, allowing no pause for an answer, becoming conciliatory; and change again, lightly happy, before the connection was cut.

Johanna checked her personal script at home, her lines underlined in red. She found a green pen and underlined Wanda's part, almost finished when Sue arrived from wherever it is that young and pretty girls go on an afternoon of a spring vacation.

Johanna looked up. "Isn't it strange?" she said.

"What?" asked Sue.

"I wonder what she was doing? Rehearsing over the phone? Being funny? But then, Wanda was never funny—she left that for Howie. He was the comedian, with his pop-up toys and his pop-out guns and his magic tricks . . ."

"What are you talking about, Mother?"

"But she said them. Over the phone. Her lines. Look, Sue." Johanna leafed through the script. "Look, this is the first thing she said over the phone that day." Johanna spoke the words breathlessly, as indicated in the stage direction, while her finger traveled along a green-inked line: " 'I must go. I have to go. But I'll be back as soon as I can.' "

"So?" said Sue.

"Then," Johanna turned toward the beginning of the play, "she said this . . ." again following the ital-

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icized direction in a pacifying voice: " 'You will come, won't you? At the usual time?' "

"Well?" said Sue.

"Then just before she hung up . . ." Johanna fanned the pages. "Yes, here it is. Just before she hung up, she said this, lightly happy: 'Great. I'll be waiting.' "

Johanna allowed the stapled pages of the script to drop back in place and looked up at Sue.

"You mean she was reading lines over the phone that morning?" asked Sue.

"I only mean she *had* read the lines *before.*"

"Before when?"

"Before then. On the tape recorder. She had that voice. Remember? No expression . . ."

"Like a mechanical voice," said Sue. "Like a doll's voice."

"Yes, like a doll's voice," said Johanna. "So we read our lines into the tape recorder—mostly Wanda's lines. Then she'd erase the tape and start over. She was getting good. Very good," and Johanna began to cry.

Sue later told her father, "You see what happened. Howie spliced the tape and had a conversation to feed to Mother over the phone so she could establish that Wanda was still alive when he left that morning."

"But the conversation came before your mother saw Wanda in the car," said Ron.

"Maybe that wasn't Wanda," said Sue.

"Oh, yes it was," said Johanna. "That was Wanda in the car." Then she had a macabre thought. "Maybe Wanda was dead and he propped her there." She shuddered.

"Waving?" Ron reminded her.

"Maybe," Johanna said desperately, "he wired her arm."

Ron, the mathematician, could not compute such an absurd suggestion.

Sue, the sociology student, could not equate it even within the weird case histories she had studied.

Johanna herself did not believe a theory so ridiculous, but she did believe, for certain, that it had been Wanda in the car and that Wanda was surely dead at the time, and Howie could not possibly have had time to haul her from the car and deposit her in the kitchen. So what had happened?

The newspaper had played the murder big on page one, where a reporter dubbed it *The Killing of the Toymaker's Wife*, but now, weeks afterward, small occasional follow-ups appeared only on an inside page, those offering but vague accounts of the police department's lack of progress.

The Little Theatre group had

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disbanded for the season, and the neighbors had begun to talk of other subjects over their coffee.

Sue, making ready to return to the university the following weekend, said, "I'd like to get in that house . . ."

"What could you find in the house?" asked Johanna.

"Maybe the patched-up tape."

"So what would that prove?"

Howie was still at the motel, coming out every day or two to water the plants and hand-cut the grass around the big plastic bobbing toy. He was still getting invited to neighboring homes for dinner, but not as often as before because Howie was shedding his Howie-the-sad-widower image and slipping back to become again Howie-the-funny-toymaker who made everyone mad.

"There he is," said Sue. "I'm going to invite him to dinner."

"No," said Johanna. She wanted no murderer in her house now that she was sure he was a murderer, although she couldn't quite see how.

"Maybe he'll let something out," said Sue.

"We haven't enough to eat."

"We'll stretch it," Sue said, and raced out the door and across the street to talk with Howie.

Howie was a bouncing, obnoxiously effervescent guest that evening at dinner, while Ron displayed an impassive tolerance. Johanna, withdrawn, played the silently disapproving hostess and Sue showed only sweet sympathy while she handled the negotiations.

Johanna had not realized Sue was negotiating until she said, leaning over the dessert that had been maneuvered to make four servings out of three, "Mr. Ravensby, you will be moving back to the house across the street, I suppose."

"Well," and Howie lost his toyman smile to gain his lost-husband gravity, "I don't know."

Then Johanna listened in awe as her daughter, student, majoring in sociology and minoring in psychology, seriously sweet-talked Howie into deciding to return to his house; and listened in greater awe and anxious wonder as she said, "Mother and I thought you might like to have us go over and get the house ready. You know, dust and clean, that sort of thing," and before Howie left that night for his motel in town, Sue had the key.

She used it the next morning on the back door of the house across the street.

"There," she said to her mother, who was trailing her. Then, "Where did you find her?"

Just as Johanna, eyes-averted, began a wide sweep of her arm, Sue saw the chalk marks on the floor, faint but still visible. Johanna

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turned to the tape recorder, still on the wide windowsill just above the kitchen table where it had always been, where she and Wanda had used it so many mornings.

"The tape is gone," she told Sue. "We used only the one tape, then we erased it and used it over again. It was about half full as I remember. So he must have spliced it, all right, and then gotten rid of it or hidden it or something."

"Right on," said her daughter. "We'll see if we can find it."

The house was unusual, well-furnished and quite beautiful, but on the tables and marching along the mantel, and on shelves in the bedrooms, the bathrooms, and the den, every place where normally a knickknack would be, stood instead a prototype, a model or a miniature of a toy created by Howie Ravensby and produced by the Raven Toy Manufacturing Company.

"I don't believe it," said Sue, startled. "I honestly don't believe it."

"When they had guests," said Johanna, "he'd wind them up, set them off, plug them in and get them started on whatever they did, and the whole house moved, walked, jumped, sang, whistled and cried. Howie loved it, Wanda sat frozen like a doll that hadn't had its key turned, and the guests were uncomfortable."

"Well, he did it," Sue declared.

"Yes," said Johanna, "but how?"

Because Sue had offered and promised, Johanna got out the vacuum cleaner, the dustcloths and polish. "I don't know what you think you can find here," she said.

"Clues," said Sue.

"Well, there won't be any or the police would have already found them."

"The police are looking for a prowler. I am looking for Howie Ravensby."

Johanna had cleaned and polished. She had mopped the kitchen tiles of what was left of the chalk marks and a faint smear of blood turned brown. She was putting away the vacuum cleaner and hanging up the dustcloths when Sue called in a voice high with excitement and quivering with the terror of discovery.

Johanna ran and rocked to a halt in the den where Sue sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the bookshelves, a thick Ravensby toy catalog on her lap. She indicated, wordlessly, the two-page spread before her, advertising 'The Personal Doll . . . Your own likeness or that of a loved one to have and to hold . . . Send us the photo of the person you wish modeled which we shall then reproduce on photographically-sensitive linen, hand-

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color, and pressure-mold to the correct facial contours, and mount on a standard doll body . . .'

"It would be too little," said Johanna, realizing what had been found and growing faint with her realization.

"It wouldn't have to be," said Sue. "Look," and she moved over in the catalog to a page she'd been holding open with a forefinger, "here," and Johanna leaned over to read, 'The Inflatable Doll . . . Blow up to life size . . . Your own honey . . . Fool the public . . . Boy dolls. Girl dolls. Gentleman dolls. Lady dolls. Sitting . . . Standing . . . Waving . . .'

Johanna gagged.

"You see," said Sue, "all he'd have to do is use a photograph of Wanda and do all those things to it he says in the ad, inflate a sitting lady doll, waving, fit the face on her and top it with a wig and there you are."

"Let's get out of here," said Johanna.

Ron added it up that night, mathematically precise. "He killed her. Then he dialed our number and played the doctored tape over the phone. You were then supposed to know," he said to Johanna, "that Wanda was still alive, and you'd probably be watching to see her leave. Then he pocketed the tape, set the doll in place, put the weapon, whatever it was, in the car, opened the garage doors and backed out. You would see Wanda clearly as he backed into the street and started forward. He went . . ." and Ron reached a point where he had no definite figures with which to work.

"He went to the shopping center," said Sue impatiently. "Naturally he went there, right through the parking lot and out the other side where there's nothing, not even any houses. He probably drove five minutes or so out where no one would see him, and back again, through the parking lot and home."

"That's what he did," said Ron, dividing the supposition into explanation, satisfied with the answer. "And you saw Wanda again," he said to Johanna, "as he turned into the driveway and up into the garage."

"It bothered me," said Johanna. "I didn't know why and I didn't know exactly what it was, but the way she still had her hand up—and this time on the far side, with me not even at the window because, by then, I'd finished the dishes—I kept wondering why was she waving and who to, not knowing exactly what it was I was wondering about."

"So he drove into the garage," said Ron, "and paused only a minute, then backed down the driveway on his way to work. No

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Wanda. It had taken only that minute to let the air out. The doll was collapsed, probably on the floor of the car. As soon as you found the body, the police were after a prowler because Howie had talked of one, and everybody remembered the prowler Howie had talked of. Not that they'd ever seen one, but with the murder they finally believed it, and so did the police."

Ron looked at his wife and daughter. "But do you think the police will believe all this?" He indicated the series of events he had written down, forming a complex equation that added up to The Killing of the Toymaker's Wife = The Toymaker.

"No," said Sue, "because this is a game, a toymaker's game, and the police believe in evidence like fingerprints, a weapon, a spliced tape and personal-inflatable doll, and they'll be gone, burnt up in an oven that pressurizes photosensitive linen . . ."

"No, they won't," Johanna interrupted. "Don't forget, Howie had great pride in his creations. He would not destroy this one, the life-size Wanda-doll; or the spliced tape and the weapon too, because they were a part of his game."

"I'll call the police," said Ron.

Who proved his mathematical conclusions correct.

And Sue a good student of people and their abnormalities.

Also Johanna as an observant and understanding neighbor, for the props of the toymaker's game were found locked up, in egomaniacal foreverness, in the office of the Raven Toy Manufacturing Company—the deflated lady doll, waving, with her Personal Mask, the patched-up recording tape, and even the weapon, a child's lightweight rubberized caveman club, made heavily lethal with cement.

"I thought all the time it was Howie Ravensby. There was something peculiar about him."

"You can say that again. Him and his toys."

"That thing out in front. On his lawn. Makes the tract look like Disneyland or something. I'll be glad when that's gone."

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Little men take heart; BIG BUSINESS can be vulnerable.

I WAS TWENTY-NINE when I applied for a job with the Webber Corporation, which was tough after owning my own business. Gordon Stocker hired me. He was in his late thirties.

Gordon said, "Death and taxes may be certain, Mr. James. But there is one thing that never dies—a corporation." This was after I told him my sad tale of losing my business. "So you'll find security here," he added.

The Webber Corporation is a giant concern that develops housing

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tracts, builds tall buildings, and is in all kinds of real estate. Gordon was the head of a branch office in the valley, and he taught me the escrow end of the business, whereby we handle transfers of titles on real estate sales; on loans, too, and for the public as well as for Webber.

After nine years I forgot about the crook who had cost me my business. I wasn't getting rich, but I did have a regular pay check, and Gordy and I played golf every Saturday and fished in the summer.

A year ago an ex-mobster from Chicago—that was the man's reputation—took over control of the Webber Corporation.

I said to Gordy, "Corporations don't die, but the ownership can change. How's this going to affect us?"

Gordy shrugged. "No way I can foresee. I've never met a top executive since I've been with Webber. We see only an attorney now and then."

I argued, "This Bruno Canaro is supposed to be a hard-nosed character. What does he want with Webber?"

"It's a moneymaking corporation. Besides, he probably wants a legitimate business among his other nefarious enterprises. Times have changed. A lot of the racketeers invest in honest corporations."

After a year passed I forgot Bruno Canaro owned Webber, but I did notice an increase in activity. Webber acquired acreage all over the valley and developed housing tracts. We had eight girls typing sales instructions and checking credit of young buyers. For a second Saturday in a row Gordy and I had to skip our golf to work.

I complained to Gordy, "This office needs more than two notaries. One of us will have to come in every Saturday."

Gordy shrugged. "Oh, just until the tract is sold out."

by Robert W. Alexander

"Nuts! Then the other one will go on sale. And rumors are that Webber is after that Crescent Valley land to build the biggest tract of homes ever attempted."

"Webber will never get that land." Gordy smiled, and we separated from the coffee urn and headed for our desks.

Monday morning, I glanced up from my notary record book to find Gordy behind me. He looked pale and his expression was puzzled. He

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announced, "Mr. Bruno Canaro just phoned me."

"You're kidding. We do something wrong?"

"I don't know. He wants me at his beach house. Right away."

I couldn't help but worry about it until Gordy came back. Then he surprised me with noncommittal answers as I threw questions at him. "A promotion, it looks like. I'll know in a few days. I'll . . . uh, I'll be gone from the office until . . . the end of the week. You can handle things here."

I watched him leave, thinking that if Gordy *is* transferred to a larger office, I'm in line for his job here. I didn't see Gordy until Friday, and then I hardly recognized him. He was a nervous wreck.

He finally told me, "I don't feel good, Jimmy. I'll see you Monday." I didn't bug him to play golf Saturday. Sunday I phoned his home and he said he was feeling better. He came in on Monday but we didn't get a chance to talk right away. *I* got a phone call!

"This is Bruno Canaro," the deep voice announced. "Buzz down to my beach place." I looked to see if Gordy was at his desk.

"This is Jimmy James. I'll find Gordon Stocker—"

"I want you, Jimmy!" He gave me the address.

I couldn't find Gordy; he must have ducked out of the office. I drove down to the beach, wondering what the big wheel of a giant corporation could possibly want with a minor employee. I located the huge bay-front home. A servant led me to a large den with a wall of tinted glass. The first thing I saw was the white pier outside, with a glistening yacht the size of a ship tied to it.

Bruno Canaro was behind a plush bar. He was a thick-shouldered man with jet-black hair, and didn't look the age he was supposed to be. People said he was over sixty. His alert eyes looked me over as I walked toward him.

"Climb on a stool," he said. "Mix ya a drink." He nodded toward a man who was stuffing papers into a briefcase at a desk. "Milt Botts. My attorney."

I nodded as Milt gave me a nod. He abruptly gathered his papers and left. I turned from watching him to find Bruno shoving a drink toward me. He leaned on the bar and put his face close to mine. He had thick lips and bushy, black eyebrows.

"It's come to my attention, you ought to be an office head."

"Really, sir?" I picked up the drink. I wasn't aware he knew I was alive. Promotions in Webber were awarded by department heads, and I was fairly certain Mr. Bruno Ca-

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naro had never met any of them.

"Yeah. Nine years, good record." He grinned like he knew a joke I wouldn't appreciate. "You got took once. Lost yer business."

I guess my surprise showed. Mr. Bruno Canaro had certainly checked my past. He didn't waste time getting to the point.

He said, "Nothin's fer nothin', Jimmy. Milt left an option on the desk. Take a look at it."

I got up and went to the desk. The option was on all the land in Crescent Valley for a price about one quarter of what it was worth today. It was dated three years ago.

Bruno motioned me back to the bar. "Webber needs the land, but the owners are trying to back out on a technicality. Hold me up for . . . never mind. Thing is, they can't welsh if you'll put your notary stamp on it, an' back-date it in your records three years."

"I see," I nodded. I certainly did! It was my notary seal he wanted to use illegally. I wondered if he had propositioned Gordy. Probably not. I'm the one who had notarized a wrong signature ten years ago, but I was the victim. Along with my small insurance business, I was also a notary. One of my policyholders sold his house and brought his wife in to have me notarize their signatures on the grant deed. I had never met her, but he introduced her as his wife, which, damn it, she wasn't.

When the real wife learned he had illegally sold her half of the house, she collected eight thousand dollars from my bonding company. Then the bonding company collected the loss from me: my car, my insurance business, and four years of payments.

I said, "I can't back-date it. It wouldn't match my records."

He had the answer. I was to copy all my records into another book, and to insert the option as having been executed three years ago. I could do it. The signatures I notarize are only signed on the documents. I fill out my own record book and don't mail it to the State until it is full, which sometimes takes five or six years.

He said, "Guys who cooperate go places. Those who don't—" He jabbed the air with his thumb.

The choice was mine, right now! He assured me there wasn't any risk; his attorney knew all the angles. If I didn't do it, I would be among the army of the unemployed; thirty-eight years old—two from forty!

He said quietly, "Jimmy, I'd kinda like ya to go along, now that you *know* about this. Know what I mean?" As my eyes rounded, he hurriedly added, "An' you'll be making more dough. Double, huh?"

I nodded agreement. I thought,

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Well, this time at least, I'm not the victim. Ha! It was the start of the Jimmy James nightmare.

The injured parties sued. There was twelve million dollars involved, twenty times what I estimated. I was subpoenaed to court, where I innocently produced my doctored notary records. There, among the entries of three years ago, was the option of contention. The judge took a look at it and ruled in favor of the Webber Corporation. The plaintiffs' attorney glared at his angry and protesting clients as though he questioned their sanity. Milton Botts winked at me as I left the court. Bruno Canaro wasn't there.

Gordy had been transferred to the Los Angeles office. I was the new office manager in the branch office, with twice my old salary. I called Gordy downtown. He refused to play golf Saturday. "Some other time," he said. He had been turning me down for four months.

"Hold on, Gordy! Let's meet for lunch," I said.

He didn't want to, but I insisted. He finally agreed and we met at a restaurant halfway between our offices. I arrived first and when he came to the booth he told the waitress, "Nothing but coffee."

He sat opposite me. He looked terrible. His eyes were bloodshot as though he lacked sleep; he was obviously worried. "You shouldn't have done it."

"Done what?"

"Faked the notary."

"Who told you?"

"No one had to tell me! I knew about the option on Crescent Valley. I typed it in my office, before Mr. Bruno Canaro took over Webber. Don't you see, Jimmy? I know too damn much and so do you! There are millions of dollars involved!"

"Oh. Did Mr. Canaro ask you to notarize it?"

"Yes, but I had an out. My old notary record book was mailed to the State. I started a new book only months ago. So I couldn't back-date three years."

"Did you tell him I was working on a book almost five years old?"

"I had to!"

"You could have warned me," I accused.

"I should have. Yes, I should have, but they would have been in to check. I couldn't lie to them. I got the promotion to department head in L.A. for keeping my mouth shut. I was hoping you'd turn him down."

I sighed. "He said he'd can me. He also slipped in a subtle threat about knowing too much. Well, what the hell, Gordy. We cooperated. We can't be in any danger from Bruno Canaro."

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Gordy moaned. "You're gullible, Jimmy." He picked up his coffee and the tremble of his hand nearly spilled it. "Listen, I never told you, but—remember Tony? Loan manager at the beach office?"

"Sure, I remember him. Fell to his death on vacation."

"Yes! Before he died, I lunched with him. He was shook up and worried. Bruno Canaro had summoned him to do some personal favors. That's how he got to be loan manager down there. But Tony told me that he used to work for Bruno Canaro in Chicago, and that Bruno had a way of recruiting solid citizens into his rackets with pressure. And after he got them involved—"

"He murdered them?" I said too loudly.

Gordy winced. "Shhh! No, he didn't say that! No, he used them to pull other crooked things. Far worse things!" He sipped his hot coffee and lowered the cup. "Haven't you guessed Tony was murdered?"

"What? He fell into the Grand Canyon. You were there on vacation. Hey, look, if Tony was murdered, it was for something back in Chicago."

"Maybe . . . I have to go. Watch yourself, Jimmy."

I didn't enjoy being the head of the branch office. The girls would have a question and it was an effort to concentrate on work. I found myself afraid of the dark, and watching cars around me. Three weeks later I got another call from Bruno Canaro. He wanted me at the beach.

He was furious when I walked into his den. He was wearing sailing clothes, and he took off his blue captain's hat and threw it across the room. "What kind of a moron are you?" he roared. If there was an appropriate answer I couldn't think of it. I just stared at him. He slammed his fist on the bar. "What did you do with your old notary record book?"

"I wrapped it up, tied it, and put it in the trash can in the alley back of my apartment."

"You idiot! Why didn't you burn it?"

"No place to burn it. It was hauled away."

"Like hell! Consiglio got it!"

"Who's Consiglio?" I asked, feeling a knot form in my stomach.

"A fink, that's who! Trying to muscle in. Wants control of Webber." Bruno jerked his thumb at the mirror behind the bar. "He had my den bugged, knows I do my private business here. Oh, don't worry, I tore it all out! But he knows we swindled those ginks on the option. He recorded it. He's got a tape, but it won't stand up in court. All he can do is cost me a fortune. But

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you! He had you tailed to your apartment. They didn't even have to muscle the record book from you. You stuck it out in the alley for them!"

"You didn't warn me."

Bruno growled, "Yeah! Well, not thinkin' is gonna cost you twenty years. That's what Milt says you'll get. I'll lose a bundle buying the Crescent Valley for the price they want, but I ain't about to let Consiglio have Webber. And Milt says it don't matter what you say. You faked the notary to get a promotion. We didn't know about it, and we'll prove it."

"Thanks a lot!" I flared back. "I'll go see an attorney!"

Bruno's expression suddenly changed when he saw the anger flooding my face. "That's how it stands, but there's an alternative. You want a drink?"

"Why not?" I said carelessly. I had been neatly framed to be the fall guy now that the Crescent Valley swindle had backfired. I climbed on the bar stool. "What alternative?"

His eyes narrowed. "Depends if you got guts. You rub him out."

"Murder him?" I wasn't prepared to hear that.

"You heard me! I'll tell ya, Jimmy, it's under consideration. When Forest Consiglio goes, this all drops. You play golf, don't ya?" I nodded, afraid to speak. He grinned. "At the golf course, Consiglio gets it in the head from a ball. It's an accident."

I winced. "Sounds stupid to me. Even if I could throw a ball hard enough, I doubt if I'd have the accuracy."

"You can't miss," he grinned again. "He plays up at the exclusive Valley Club. I can get you in. When he finishes a round, he generally goes on the putting green for practice. You can hang around there. Get him when there's no one around."

"With a putted golf ball?" I protested.

"No! With a hammer! Now, don't sneer, dammit! I pay a lot of money for these accident ideas that can be pulled off without questions."

"I don't know if I could. I'll have to think about it."

"Sure. Take an hour. Go sit on the boat. I'll be here. Just remember, you'll be pretty old when they let you out."

I sat in the sunshine, rationalizing that Consiglio was another gangster who was out to do me harm. I further considered that he undoubtedly had had men killed. I thought of Gordy and how this would affect him. He was about to have a nervous breakdown, and so was I. I considered going to the police, and I reconsidered. Informers invariably

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died. It boiled down to kill or else.

For two days Forest Consiglio had company on the practice green behind the clubhouse. He always walked onto the putting green from the eighteenth hole, but one of his party had joined him the past two days. The Valley Club was a private course, small, with not too many people. The practice green was surrounded with trees and tall leafy bushes where I waited, hidden from sight.

I used a passionate intensity as a substitute for confidence, though I had convinced myself the method of murder was ingenious. The heavy hammer in the large pocket of my loose jacket had one half of a hard golf ball fastened to the head. I had a matching whole golf ball of the identical design to drop after I hit the man with the hammer.

The third day, Consiglio finally was on the putting green by himself. I carefully checked that there was nobody in sight. I walked onto the green with a putter in my left hand. I putted a ball toward Consiglio and walked toward him, again checking that we were not observed. I quickly caught him a hard blow on the right temple. He collapsed on the short grass, the left side of his face down. I again checked around, then quickly stooped and pressed the ball I carried against the trickle of blood coming from the wound. I tossed the ball away as though it had bounced from his head. There was no more bleeding. He was obviously dead. I tucked the lethal hammer back into my pocket and got away unseen. As I walked toward my car I could see that a flying ball could come from the fourth hole tee, or from a sliced ball off the eighth hole. His death would have to be assessed an accident. It was.

The news reported that Forest Consiglio, former racketeer from Chicago, had been accidentally killed at the Valley Club golf course. I snapped the radio off. I drove aimlessly for hours before I returned to my apartment, but I began to suffer repercussions from my conscience. I made myself a drink and found my hand shaking. I sat down in a chair and stared blankly across the room.

"What have I done?" I cried to myself. The drink made me sick to my stomach. I tried to watch television, but by ten o'clock I knew what was meant by "coming unglued." It was eleven when someone rang my door buzzer. I hoped it was the police. I wanted to confess to somebody!

It was Bruno Canaro. He took a look at my face. "Get ahold of yourself!" he hissed. He checked the hallway, then stepped in and

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closed the door behind him. "Take it easy. Ya did fine!"

I nodded. "I feel sick."

"Sure ya do," he said. He pushed me onto the couch and sat down beside me. He watched me swallow, and grinned. "Ya wish ya hadn't a done it. Right?" I nodded. "S'all right. I understand. I never let a beginner sit home and sulk after his first hit."

"First!" I managed to gasp.

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"Calm down. Sure, you'll stop worrying about the first one. Believe me, I know about this. It's for your own good."

"You're crazy!" I got up and moved away from him.

He laughed and didn't say anything. When I turned around he was lighting a cigar. There was amusement in his eyes as he blew smoke. It was hard to believe a powerful, rich man like Bruno Canaro was in my apartment. It was even more incredible that I had murdered a man for him. I wondered if Consiglio had been a personal threat to me. How could I have been so stupid? How could Consiglio have gotten into the beach home to bug the den? I was a sucker!

"Who else do you have in mind?" I asked quietly.

Bruno's eyes narrowed. "A guy who's cracking up, one who can send you to the chair. Whatever else you're thinking, think about that!"

I nodded. He was right. He held murder over my head. Bruno Canaro had recruited me into his gang, for no reason other than opportunity. I was gullible. I had turned into a crook when I notarized the option. He had conned me into murder on the ridiculous supposition I was going to be the fall guy.

I said, "Forest Consiglio wasn't any threat to me after all, was he?"

"Think what you like!" he spit back. "But I can tell you who is, and I can tell you *why!* Your former buddy, Gordon Stocker!"

"Gordy?" I gasped. "What's he to do with—"

"Everything! Stocker was supposed to knock off Consiglio. He hung around the golf course two days and lost his nerve."

"You're lying! Gordy is honest!"

"Bull! He and Tony pulled some shady loans through your escrow department. My auditor caught it."

I considered what he was telling me. I shook my head. "No, if someone was robbing the funds, it was Tony. Not Gordy."

Bruno shrugged. "You might be right about that. I'm tellin' ya straight. Tony made it look like Stocker took the dough."

"And Tony is dead."

"Yeah, and guess who killed him?"

My knees felt weak. "Not . . . Gordy?"

"Beautiful accident. All right, I told your Gordy that Tony had framed him, and that he was headed for twenty years. His only out was to bump Tony off. So your Gordy followed him to the Grand Canyon and nudged him off a trail. It shook him up. He went to pieces. If he could have hit Consiglio, he'd have been all right."

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"So I killed Consiglio for you."

"You're catching on. Incidentally, after you get rid of Gordy, you go on the board of directors for Webber. Pays twenty-five grand a year. I mean, you're a guy I can trust, wouldn't ya say?"

"Yeah. But why should I kill Gordy?"

"Somebody's got to! Look, Jimmy, loose ends can hang you. Gordon Stocker is about to give in to his conscience. He'll go to the cops for sure. When they start pumping him, he'll spill about Consiglio, and he'll tell them about you. Can't you see? He knows you're the one who murdered Consiglio. I don't like sending you after a friend, but there's no choice. They can't pin any of this on me. Milt said I'm covered. But *you*—"

"How do I do it?"

"Attaboy." He grinned. "With a shotgun. They can't trace pellets. Go over to his house now, to his back door. He'll recognize your voice. Just blast him and get the hell out fast."

"I'm his best friend. The police will ask questions."

"You tear down to the beach. Milt and I will swear you been there all night. The servants have the night off. Now, don't worry. This has been planned out."

"What about a shotgun?"

Got one in my car. Come on down with me and get it," he said.

I followed him out to his car. He handed me the shotgun wrapped in a blanket and warned me it was loaded. I told him I'd get my coat and leave right away. As I climbed the stairs I saw him drive away. I entered my apartment and headed for the kitchen.

"Gordy?" I called. I knew he was in the kitchen. I had phoned him earlier to come over, and Gordy always comes up the back stairs because he knows he can park in front of my garage. I swung the kitchen door open. Gordy's face was white. I asked, "How much did you hear?"

"I was coming in when he rang the bell. Well, now you know about me. What a mess! I tried to warn you not to get involved."

I asked, "Did you really kill Tony?"

He winced as he nodded. "Yes. Tony framed me. I was angry with him. I pushed him off a ledge. But later I—"

"You don't have to tell me."

"Jimmy, I think the only thing we can do is go to the police."

"For what? Let's think about this, Gordy." I paced to the livingroom. "For one thing, we haven't murdered anyone decent."

"Does it matter?" he groaned.

"To me! Gordy, I have another shotgun in my closet. I think the only out is to go to the beach."

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"The beach!" Gordy's eyes rounded.

"Kill a couple of rats. I figure Bruno Canaro and Milton Botts are down there alone. I have the large hunch they are the only two who know about us. You blast one, I'll blast the other. What do you say? We can only hang once."

Gordy nodded. I knew he could do it. He ran a machine gun during World War II against the Japs. I had killed many a gook over in Korea, during that war. So as we drove toward the beach as buddies on a mission, we gained a great deal of confidence.

Gordy said, "I think Bruno's trouble is, he never had a close friend."

"Yeah," I agreed. "He can talk a man into anything—anything—except loyalty."

It was three in the morning when we rang Bruno's bell. He answered the door and I pointed the shotgun at him. We rushed him through the house into his den. Milton Botts wasn't there. "Where's Milt?" I demanded.

"Go to hell!" Bruno snarled.

I nodded to Gordy and raced upstairs. I found Milton Botts in bed. He sat up when I turned on the lights. "What's—" He started to scream as I let the shotgun go off.

The explosion no sooner died out than a second gun went off downstairs. I ran down the steps and found Gordy motioning me to hurry. I caught one glance of Bruno's body on the floor, and then Gordy and I were out of the house.

We drove fifty miles away and threw the shotguns off a bridge into saltwater. Then we stopped and had coffee. We sat in silence, sipping the hot coffee. Gordy broke the silence.

"Can you play golf Saturday?"

I turned to him with my mouth open. He was grinning. I started to smile. "I don't see any reason why not, Gordy."

"Pick you up at eight, Jimmy," and he did.

Of course, we're both wondering if the police will trace the murders to us, but two months have passed. We'll take our chances. Corporations don't die; we still have good jobs.

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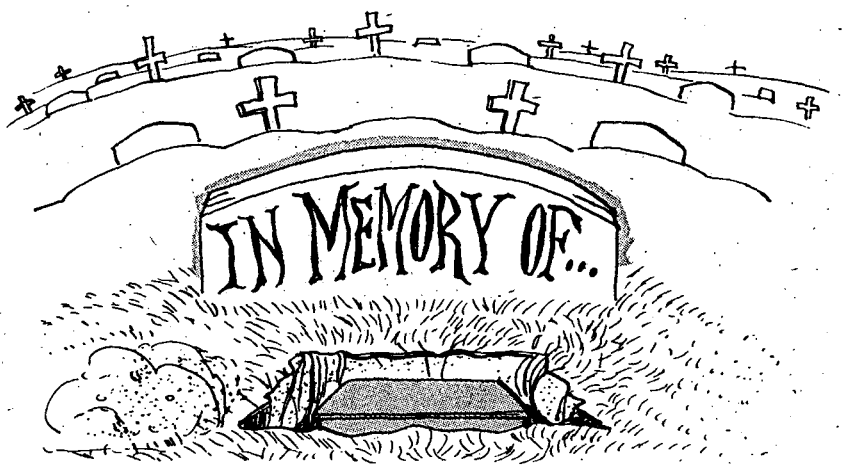
If one lays the necessary groundwork, no problem is too big to handle.

THE LANGS stood quietly beside the small open grave. Florence Lang wore an expression of restrained grief on her fleshy, rather pretty rose-colored face; the proper expression for such an occasion, Hollis thought. Mr. Lang, a short, thin and very erect man of about fifty, appeared impatient. His stern, seamed features were set hard above the red ascot he favored instead of a tie. He shifted his slight weight from one foot to the other and stood with his slender hands folded in front of him.

"What are we waiting for?" he asked. He had a slight German accent.

Hollis started to answer just as the bells of Saint Michael's Church, four blocks away, began to peal the hour. Instead of speaking to Mr. Lang, he nodded in the general direction of the clear, wavering notes and stooped to pick up the small wooden box by the grave. The



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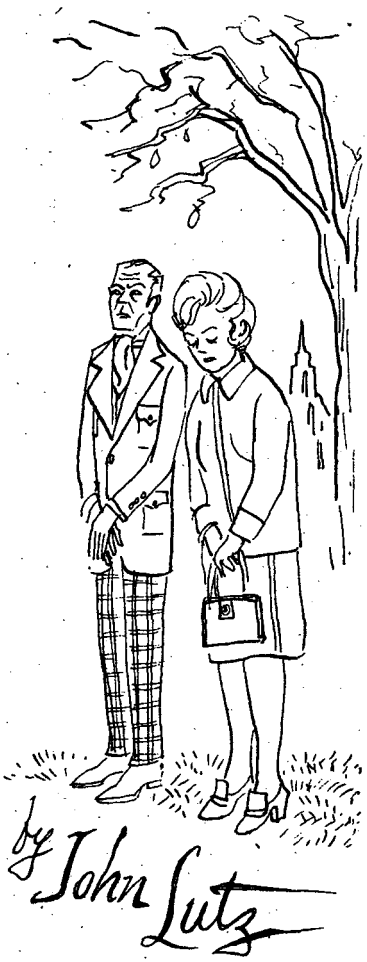
Langs had chosen to purchase a box rather than furnish their own.

Quickly but very carefully Hollis placed the box into the three-foot grave, seeing that it sat flat on the earth and no corners were caught on the narrowing sides of the grave. He brushed some dark bits of dirt from the tiny stone at the head of the grave and stood.



by John Lutz

The small headstone read simply:

TAG
1959–1971
A LOYAL COMPANION

Hollis stepped back and walked away from the Langs then, to let them be alone by the new grave of their pet for a few minutes. Ten years ago, when he'd first bought the business, he used to say a few awkward words over the graves, but they had sounded hollow, mechanical and embarrassingly ridiculous. He'd since decided to time the burials with the chiming of the church bells and let it go at that. Hard enough for him sometimes to share in the remorse over the death of a man, much less someone's pet—not that the grief wasn't just as real, the bond of affection sometimes greater. So now he stood waiting for the Langs, listening to the hum of traffic on the busy highway that bordered his kennel and pet cemetery.

"Come on," he heard Mr. Lang say, "we're going to be late at the Davidsons'."

Hollis saw no change of expression on Mrs. Lang's pleasant, middle-aged face as she stood gazing down at the grave. When Mr. Lang turned to walk toward Hollis, she followed, her gaze caught for a moment on the grave as if she re-

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gretted looking away. The bells had stopped pealing now and the vibrations of their clear tones hung, fading in the summer air.

"How much do I owe you exactly?" Mr. Lang asked Hollis.

Mrs. Lang looked imploringly at her husband. "Charles, he said he'd bill us."

"I can send you a statement," Hollis said.

Mr. Lang, holding himself erect, was at eye level with his wife, and he gave her a stern, sideways glance. "We might as well settle now," he answered, his small, hard features turned up to Hollis, "and get it over with."

Hollis nodded. "Whatever you say." He didn't look at Mrs. Lang. "Fifty dollars is the usual charge."

Mr. Lang drew a leather-covered checkbook from his suit-coat pocket and with a ball-point pen scrawled the amount and his signature on the check. He handed the check to Hollis and turned to go.

Mrs. Lang looked at Hollis then in somewhat the same way she'd looked at her husband earlier.

"You can visit the grave any time you want," Hollis said to her.

"Thank you." The lined corners of her pale lipsticked mouth turned up in a sad come-and-gone smile, and she followed her husband to their new red car, opening the door for herself and getting in with her knees primly together. As they drove slowly past the wire kennels the dogs put up their usual frantic and short-lived barks and howls.

Hollis watched the car move around the bend in the gravel drive and pass his small, white, frame house. Then he could no longer see the car, but he heard the crunching sound of a tire spinning on gravel as Mr. Lang turned onto the road and accelerated, and the dogs quieted.

In the silence Hollis stood for a while thinking about Mrs. Lang. He could almost feel the tension between her and her husband. Their relationship, a hundred things he couldn't identify but was aware of, reminded him of the relationships between some dog-owners and their dogs. He supposed a psychiatrist would call it a love-hate relationship. To some dog-owners it was obedience. The dogs were whipped, dominated and made to live within certain—sometimes cruel—routines, and still with affection they regarded their owners as their masters. Perhaps some people were the same way.

Of course Mrs. Lang hadn't seemed that type. She had come to Hollis yesterday about the burial, and he had seen immediately that she'd been very fond of her Scottie, Tag. It wasn't the misguided gushy kind of affection usually associated with an elderly matron and her

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poodle; it seemed to Hollis to be a sensible, mature grief of an intelligent woman who had lost a long-time pet of which she was very fond. In a restrained, quiet way they had made arrangements to have Tag buried in the pet cemetery the next day, and she had given Hollis instructions to use the expensive cedar box rather than the pine. He had gotten the impression that she and her husband had money.

"How old was Tag?" Hollis had asked as he walked her to her car.

"Eleven," Florence Lang had answered, "but he didn't die of old age, I'm sure. It was something he ate."

The way she had said it made Hollis sure she suspected the dog had been poisoned. "Have you considered having a veterinarian perform an autopsy?" he'd asked.

She had shaken her head and smiled her strained smile. "It wouldn't help to find out if Tag was poisoned. It wouldn't change things."

When the Langs had brought the dog this morning, wrapped in a heavy towel, Hollis had looked at its distorted muscles and fixed, bare-toothed death grin and known at once it had died of strychnine poisoning, but he had said nothing.

The deep-throated barking of his own Alsatian, Luke, broke through Hollis' thoughts, and he remembered there was work to be done. He turned for a moment and looked at the mound of dirt by Tag's open grave, set among more than a hundred other graves marked by small plaques, stones or simple wooden crosses. Then he walked toward the tool shed to get a shovel.

Florence Lang came the next weekend, with a small bouquet of daisies. She looked in much better spirits and there was genuine warmth in her smile as she greeted Hollis.

He was hosing down the cement dog runs, and he turned off the water and returned her smile, feeling the catch in his back as he stooped to twist the faucet handle. He wasn't getting younger; it was almost six years now since Margaret had died. Hollis wondered why he'd thought of Margaret as he saw Mrs. Lang walk toward him.

Now there was some embarrassment in her smile. "I . . . came to put these on Tag's grave," she said. "I know it seems foolish . . ."

"Not to me," Hollis said. "Not if you were fond of the dog."

He watched her walk to the grave, stepping gracefully among the undersized markers and crosses, and stoop to place the daisies near the headstone. When she returned he asked her if she'd care for a cup of coffee, and she accepted.

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They went into the tiny office where Hollis had an electric percolator set up, and he poured two cups. Mrs. Lang didn't request cream or sugar. She sat in a worn chair and began to sip her black coffee.

"Did you win all these?" she asked, looking at the trophies and awards on the wall behind Hollis' desk.

"We'll have to give credit to Luke," Hollis said with a smile. "That's his picture, winner of three national championships—but that's been a long time ago. My wife and I used to enter our dogs in a lot of shows, but she died six years ago and I guess I lost interest then."

"You have a nice place here," Mrs. Lang said, "quiet, peaceful. I suppose you must love animals."

Then Hollis didn't know why he said what he said, but suddenly there the words were, in the air between them as if they had spoken themselves. "I think Tag was poisoned. Your husband wasn't very fond of the dog, was he?"

For just an instant Mrs. Lang looked shocked. Then with a steady hand she raised her cup to her lips and took a long sip of hot coffee.

"I'm . . . sorry," Hollis said, running a hand down his long, sun-etched face as if he were weary.

"It's all right," Mrs. Lang said. "What you said is true—Charles wasn't very fond of Tag. He's not the kind of man to be overly fond of animals, or of most people for that matter. You're quite right . . ." Then, obviously aware that she had said too much, she added, "He has his faults, like everybody else."

"Sure," Hollis said. He settled his lean body to sit on the edge of the desk.

"I know what you're thinking," Mrs. Lang said in a pleasant, conversational voice. "You're thinking Charles couldn't be very fond of me." Her hand was still steady about the handle of her cup.

Hollis felt the sudden flush of blood to his face. "You're right," he admitted, "I was thinking that." He smiled a smile that wouldn't quite hold. "I'm the first to admit it's none of my business."

"My husband has his points, like everyone else," Mrs. Lang said with just an edge of defensiveness.

"You said that about his faults," Hollis reminded her.

"Well, I did, didn't I?" Mrs. Lang said. "I'll stand by both statements, Mr. Hollis." She looked at her wristwatch in alarm and stood. "Oh, it looks like I'm going to be late for my garden club."

"I didn't mean to keep you," Hollis said.

Mrs. Lang's smile was plainly meant to put him at his ease on that point. "I kept myself, Mr. Hollis,

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really. It was not your fault."

He took her empty cup and held open the screen door for her.

"Thank you for the coffee," she said politely as she picked up her purse and walked past him.

Hollis sat again on the desk and listened to her drive away. She had left behind her, in the small office, the scent of a perfume that many women her age used. Lilac, he thought it was.

Mrs. Lang came often after that, sometimes to lay flowers on Tag's small grave, sometimes only to stand and look down at it for a while. She always stopped for a cup of coffee with Hollis, and they would talk.

Mrs. Lang never said anything else really detrimental about her husband, bound as she was by the loyalty of marriage, but Hollis could interpret the things she said. There developed a trust between them, and an understanding.

Then one day she came into the office and Hollis could see she'd been crying. Her eyes were moist and aggravated and her blue mascara had smudged slightly. At first Hollis thought she might have been crying over the dog, but her hand trembled when she took the steaming coffee cup from him and sat down.

"What is it?" he asked, squatting down beside her and resting his hand on hers to put her at ease.

"We argued," Mrs. Lang said quietly. "That's all."

"About what?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"What did he say to you?"

Mrs. Lang pulled her hand from beneath Hollis' and curled the fingers of both hands around the warm cup. "He wants to move," she said, "to Europe. I don't want to go. This is my home, this country, this city. My mother lives here, and I take care of her. He and I argue about it all the time. It's not a big thing, I suppose, but we argue about it."

"Did you ever think of letting him go alone?" Hollis asked.

"If I don't go with him he will go alone. If he leaves me I'll have nothing, nothing at all."

"Surely you'll have some money, support, alimony."

Mrs. Lang stared into her cup. "Yes, some money, I suppose." As Hollis watched, she began to cry, only one small tear that trailed a pale mark on her made-up cheek. "He called me old," she said, "over and over, old, old, old . . ."

Hollis stood, feeling the pain in his back from stooping too long, and rested the back of his hand on her shoulder.

A horn honked, and he looked out the unwashed window to see a customer standing outside holding a Doberman pinscher on a leash. Hol-

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lis walked out and examined the dog's inoculation papers without going back into the office. After getting the Doberman settled in one of the dog runs, he returned and found that Mrs. Lang had stopped crying and was sitting calmly, sipping her coffee.

They talked for a long time then, as if nothing had happened, never touching on her argument with her husband. At last, when Mrs. Lang was leaving, she turned at the door and spoke very carefully to Hollis. "I've decided to get another dog," she said. "A big one, a Great Dane."

Hollis nodded. "If you want one, maybe that's a good idea."

Her quick little smile, the scent of her perfume, and she was gone. Hollis got to work on the registration papers for the litter of pups his Alsatian bitch had just delivered, and he forgot all about the Great Dane until Mrs. Lang's next visit, two weeks later.

Hollis was outside painting the corner post of the cemetery gate when she came. It was a warm summer day, but not too warm, with a soft breeze, so they stood outside and talked.

"I can't stay too long," Mrs. Lang said, looking at the wet, half-painted post.

"As long as you like." Hollis set down the brush and placed the lid on the can of paint for emphasis.

Mrs. Lang smiled, looking at him rather steadily through her pale blue eyes. "It's about the Great Dane I bought—remember the one I told you about?"

Hollis leaned on a dry portion of the post and nodded.

Mrs. Lang looked away from his eyes then, staring at the ground. "He . . . died, I'm afraid."

Hollis looked at her carefully, saw how the merciless sun behind him brought out the fine lines in her face. "Poisoned?"

"I think so," she said, still looking down. Then she looked again directly at Hollis in a way that made him stop leaning on the post. "I'd like it if he could be buried here."

The summer breeze came up stronger than usual, turning the weather vane atop the tool shed to point in another direction. "He can be," Hollis said in a measured, gentle voice.

Mrs. Lang smiled her quick smile and gave a sigh of gratitude. "I . . . we'll furnish the box this time. I have a large box, an old steamer trunk."

"All right," Hollis said. He placed his heel on the paint can lid and pressed it on tighter. "Do you want a stone?"

"I think just a cross will do," Mrs. Lang said.

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"Of course," Hollis said. "You hadn't had the dog very long. What was the name?"

"King," Mrs. Lang said thoughtfully. "His name was King."

"Early tomorrow morning?"

She nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Hollis."

Hollis watched her walk to her car, and before she opened the door she turned and looked back at him. He wiped his big hands on his paint-stained trousers and smiled at her. As she drove slowly past the kennels, the dogs began their begging, lonely howls.

Early the next morning she arrived alone in the red car, and Hollis was standing outside to greet her. The trunk was an old black one, with brass latches and thick leather straps. There were traces of paper and glue on the sides where travel stickers had either worn or been torn off. As Mrs. Lang watched, Hollis wrestled it from the trunk of the car and moved it through the cemetery gate to the open grave.

They said nothing for a moment, and Hollis listened to his heavy breathing in the cool morning air. Then the church bells began to chime loudly, some ancient simple hymn that Hollis didn't know. He lowered the trunk into the grave and stood looking down at its marred and faded lid.

Mrs. Lang walked away then, to wait in the office while Hollis filled in the grave. As he bent over the shovel he could feel her eyes on his back as she stood at the window, watching each rhythmic scoop of earth.

When Hollis was finished he joined Mrs. Lang in the office and they talked for a while before she left, about the weather and how pretty the geraniums were near the cemetery gate.

Mrs. Lang visited Hollis often after that, always taking time for a cup of coffee and a friendly chat. She seemed to Hollis to be happier, more contented, but perhaps that was only when she was in his presence. Sometimes she would bring a small bouquet of daisies and place them on Tag's grave, but Hollis never saw her place flowers on the Great Dane's grave.

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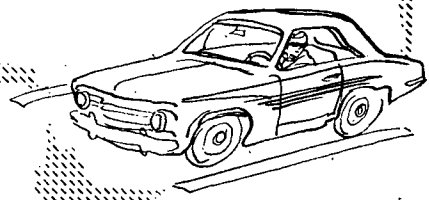
In the words of Sir Thomas Browne, "How shall we expect charity towards others, when we are uncharitable to ourselves?"

Charity Case



I AM AN EX-GUEST of the state for three weeks when Swifty Switlock visits my cold-water suite one evening. Swifty is a conniving character with as much aversion to manual labor—and affinity for easy cash—as I myself have professed over the years.

"Hi, Wheels," Swifty greets me with a toothy grin, appropriating my one comfortable chair. "I heard you were on the street again. How's everything?"

I settle on the side of the bed. "Pretty good, considering," I concede.

His dark eyes glint. "You mean, you've been scoring already?"

"I mean, I've been working."

Swifty's jaw drops; I might well have told him I'd been desecrating my mother's grave. "*Working?*"

"I'm a custodian in a factory."

He gives me a sharp look at the euphemism. "Maybe you just sweep up?"

I agree with him. "Anyway, it's a good job," I say.

"But for pete's sake, why, Wheels? A guy with your driving talent—"

I shake my head. "I'm a three-time loser, remember? One more

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fall and I'm a permanent resident behind the grillwork."

Swifty bats his eyes in amazement. "They know about your record?" he marvels.

"Uh huh," I say. "The company manager is a good joe. He tells me if I keep my nose clean, he'll stand behind me."

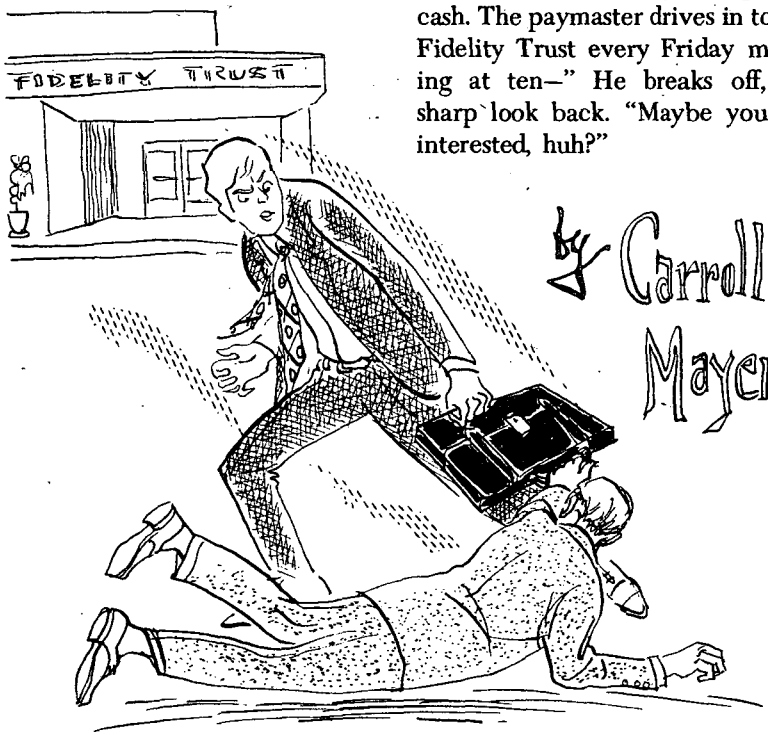
"At a crummy buck an hour."

"One-fifty."

Swifty still can't accept it. "It's crazy, Wheels, you pushing a broom." He draws a deep breath. "I figure you would be just the guy to help me get some scratch money to take me out to the coast, pick up a grand or two for yourself . . ."

Curiosity nudges me; I mean, a thousand or so is not exactly a penny-ante payoff, considering my present economic status. I suggest, "You're talking pretty big."

Swifty nods. "It's a payroll deal: the Premier Pipe and Flange, out on Route Thirty. They still pay in cash. The paymaster drives in to the Fidelity Trust every Friday morning at ten—" He breaks off, his sharp look back. "Maybe you *are* interested, huh?"



by Carroll Mayers

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I consider for a moment or so. Then I say, "Maybe."

"Great, Wheels."

"How'd you learn the setup?"

"A chick I've been playing up to has a cousin who works in the shipping department," Swifty explains. "She happens to mention the cash-payment bit the other night."

"You figure to grab the payroll at the bank?"

"In their parking lot, when the paymaster comes back to his car. I'll knock him down, snatch his bag or whatever, pile into our heap and we'll take off. I know the bank's center-city, with plenty of traffic, but an ace wheelman like you can get us clear with no sweat at all." Swifty stops again, eyeing me expectantly. "Think about it," he urges. "We can't miss."

"I'm thinking," I admit.

"And . . . ?"

"All right," I agree finally. "We'll give it a whirl. I figure my jalopy is tuned up sharp enough to use. I'll dirty up the plates."

Swifty's eyes dance. "Great," he says once more.

Friday is three days off. I meet Swifty the nights in between and we plan the caper in detail. We go around to the bank, and I check the parking lot, tab the best spot to park our car for a speedy exit. I also check traffic flow in the immediate vicinity, one-way streets, stoplights, satisfy myself as to the route I'll drive. For his part, Swifty makes certain his gal elicits an accurate description of the Premier paymaster from her cousin, so he'll recognize the guy in the parking lot.

We get a break with the weather Friday; it's overcast, with intermittent showers forecast, which means possibly less traffic downtown. I cover my job by phoning in sick, then pick up Swifty at nine, and at nine-thirty we're stashed in my selected spot in the bank's parking lot, reading and waiting.

At ten-ten Swifty tenses, points to a chubby citizen getting out of a shiny blue sedan. The man is carrying a black briefcase.

"That's him!" Swifty breathes. As the paymaster heads for the bank's rear entrance, Swifty eases out of our crate, saunters over to the entrance. I start my motor, open the passenger door.

Five minutes tick away. Ten. Then the paymaster emerges from the bank. Swifty casually falls in behind him as he walks toward his sedan, then abruptly quickens his pace, slugs the man from the back. The paymaster falls down. Swifty grabs for the briefcase, doesn't get it. The paymaster sprawls on the ground. Swifty kicks him, snatches at the briefcase again.

By now the tempo is definitely spiritoso. Two other customers

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drive into the parking lot, spot the action. One begins to shout; the other leans on his horn. People start popping out of the bank. Swifty is still battling the paymaster, frantically trying to latch onto the briefcase.

I blow my own horn. "Forget it!" I yell. "Come on!"

Swifty's head jerks around, chagrin quirking his thin features. For another instant he tangles with the paymaster, then gives up, races back. I already have the jalopy moving; Swifty piles in and we take off with a screech of rubber.

Swifty's frustration has him almost in tears. "I blew it!" he moans. "He had the damned briefcase chained to his wrist! I should've checked out that possibility and I didn't—"

I wrench the jalopy around a cruising taxi. "So it just isn't our day," I try to soothe him. "Hang on; this'll be wild."

It is; dodging trucks, zooming past buses, scattering pedestrians, holding to my planned route but still suffering inevitable squeakers. After fifteen palpitating minutes, though, we're clear; there's no pursuit. I slow down, finally ferry a disconsolate Swifty to his pad, drive home myself.

The next day, Swifty takes off for the coast without the scratch money he'd envisioned and I go back to Premier Pipe and a promotion.

I suppose I do give Swifty a fast shuffle when he unwittingly zeros in on my employer for his score. I am risking that fourth fall, yes, but I feel I am still slick enough behind the wheel to get us clear. Also, charity begins at home, and I decide it's worth a gamble to boost my reformed image. Which it is. Management is impressed with how the precautionary measure I drop in the company suggestion box pays off the very first week, and so I get that promotion to assistant in the tool shop, plus a nice bonus.

Sure, my suggestion to handcuff the payroll briefcase to the paymaster's wrist is an obvious one for these parlous times, but the company never has implemented the safeguard. Now it's to be standard operating procedure. I don't figure to elaborate on why I stressed the idea.

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Some alarming premonitions are often based on firsthand knowledge.

I MET MONTON when we were both still in high school. Later, as editor of a small local magazine, he published some of my early work. We became good friends, and for some years he made sure that he never lost touch with me.

Paul Monton was a tall, rangy lad with a rather angular but not unattractive face. He was always smiling, ebullient, brimming with self-confidence. He was sure that he would be a famous literary figure by the time he was thirty.

Unfortunately, his early confidence was anchored more in the energy and enthusiasm of youth than in the solid ground of actual talent. His confidence was not enough; he simply lacked ability.

As the years ground on—including the grim years of the Great Depression—Monton fared badly. Although he did possess some limited editorial competence, his own writing was atrocious and no newspaper or magazine would put up with him for more than a few weeks.

He drifted into display advertising, door-to-door selling, retail store clerking and, finally, hard manual labor in a warehouse.

Through all this descending spiral, however, he never completely lost track of me. A postcard or brief letter would arrive every few months. At long intervals he would pay me a visit. In spite of his own failure, he seemed genuinely

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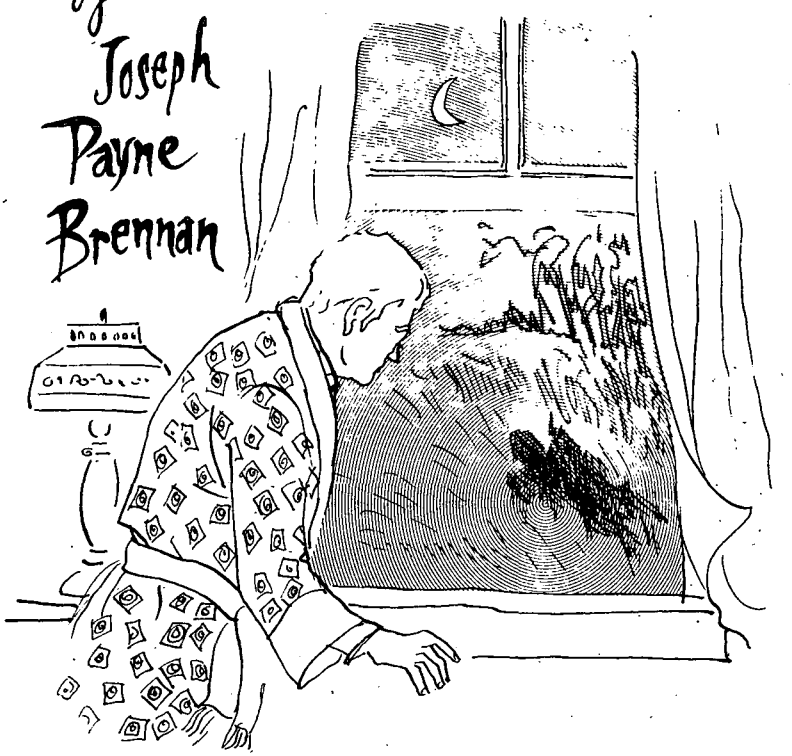
pleased at my own occasional success with a poem or a short story. Since he had published some of my very early work, I suppose he experienced a sort of vicarious satisfaction at my modest success.

I treated him with kindness, with never a hint of condescension; but he did depress me. His smile grew forced and his ebullience synthetic, his self-confidence having been drained out of him by dreary jobs, petty bosses and dingy surroundings.

It was all rather tragic, I thought, but there were so many worse tragedies reported by the news media that I knew there were people who envied even Monton.

As the depression tapered off and we entered the war years, Monton's fortunes seemed to take a slight upward turn. He became a teller in one of the local banks which had survived the "crash" without hav-

by Joseph Payne Brennan



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ing to close its doors. I doubt that he earned more in the bank than he had previously in the warehouse, but at least it was lighter work and it gave him a tenuous aura of prestige.

At about that time I suddenly found myself on a troop train heading for an Army camp in Tennessee, and for over three years I had no word from Monton.

Some time after my discharge from the service, I met him on the street. Although he had been rejected by the armed forces because of some obscure physical disability, he had grown plump. He wore flashy clothes; one finger held a massive diamond ring.

He greeted me with gusto. "My day off!" he exclaimed. "Heading for the track! Why not join me?"

"The track?" I asked absently.

He laughed. "The horses! Don't you take a little flyer now and then?"

I shook my head. "Afraid not. I gamble enough as it is."

He looked interested. "You gamble?"

"Whenever I write a story I gamble. It may sell or it may not. If it doesn't, I've lost hours of time and quite a bit of honest energy."

He smiled with surprising friendliness. "Well, Brennan, I know you're gambling with the odds in your favor then—I've seen most of your stuff and I know it's good!"

I thanked him for the compliment, and after a few inconsequential remarks we went our separate ways.

I'd usually meet him, after that, once or twice a year. If he was working, he'd be dressed in a sober dark blue suit, sans diamond ring, but if I met him on his day off, he invariably wore a brightly-patterned sports jacket and the big diamond ring glittered on one finger. In these brief encounters, I gathered that his job was a sort of dead-end affair. He still visited the racetracks.

About a decade after our first postwar meeting, I nearly bumped into him one rainy afternoon. He seemed glad to see me and he stopped to talk in spite of the downpour. It was his day off, but I noticed that he was rather shabbily dressed and that his enormous diamond ring had vanished.

As we conversed, it became apparent that he was embittered about his bank job, and he had not been having much luck with the horses. Although he never mentioned it, it was quite obvious to me that his ring reposed in some pawnbroker's safe.

He ended the conversation reluctantly, trudging away through the rain with a dispirited air. I felt sorry for him, but I didn't see how I

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could alter the pattern of his bleak existence. My own problems were multiplying and, like Monton, I was not getting any younger.

Nearly a year passed before I heard from him again. Unexpectedly, he wrote from a sparsely-settled area of northern Connecticut, explaining that he had inherited a farmhouse and a small competence from an uncle whom he had not seen since early childhood. He had quit his bank job and, by living frugally, hoped to manage without working again.

In spite of his sudden good fortune, it seemed evident to me that he was not happy. He virtually begged me to come up and stay with him for at least a few weeks. He assured me that I could have two rooms for my own use and that he would not interfere with my writing chores if I chose to continue them while remaining as his guest.

Ordinarily, I would have politely declined his invitation. I no longer felt very close to Monton. However, I was terribly tired; my apartment neighbors were noisy; and my doctor suggested a vacation. I wrote Monton that I would pay him a visit.

His farmhouse was situated in the township of Tunxis, which is somewhat north of the village of Juniper Hill. The approach to this area is not cheering at any season. After traversing a series of uphill roads which climb through dark hemlock woods, you enter a region of uncommon desolation. The land is high, barren and infertile. Unused pastures holding great, gray, lichen-covered boulders line the dusty roads. Wind stirs sibilantly through the matted brindle grass of the unmowed meadows. Beyond the fields, woods made up largely of evergreens stand shadowy and silent. In some places, forbidding marshes, ringed with heavy growths of willows, stretch for miles.

By the time I reached Juniper Hill, I had acquired an ineffable but persistent mood of apprehension. I blamed it on the landscape, however, and still looked forward to a few weeks of blessed quiet.

I drove north from Juniper Hill on a narrow dirt road which wound past cattail swamps, stands of spruce and empty, stone-littered fields. It was still late summer but already a premonition of autumn seemed to imbue the air.

Late in the afternoon, as I rounded a curve in the skimpy trace, Monton's farm home came into view. It was an old clapboarded saltbox set back some distance from the road. The house bore a new coat of white paint and appeared to be in good condition.

As I drove into the entranceway, Monton came out the front door

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and waved. As soon as I shut off the motor, he came up to the car and shook hands.

I was startled by his appearance. His face had grown gaunt and pale and he seemed unaccountably nervous.

After I had driven my car into a nearby barn which served as garage, I followed him into the house.

He immediately brought out brandy and soda and we sat down in the livingroom. Most of the furniture appeared nondescript but reasonably comfortable. Having had prior experience with icy New England farmhouses, I noticed with relief that the room held heat registers.

Monton rambled on rather aimlessly while I sipped brandy. He seemed ill at ease in spite of his new freedom. He spoke of trying his hand at writing again, adding that he had been reading for hours on end. As usual he inquired about my own work and he seemed pleased that I was inching ahead.

When I finished my drink, he conducted me to two upstairs rooms; a bedroom and a sort of sitting room which could serve as my study. A bathroom was situated nearby at the end of a hall.

Later, at dinner, Monton apologized for serving it in the kitchen, but I assured him that I preferred a farmhouse kitchen to any other room anywhere, which was a fact.

The meal was simple but adequate. After another brandy, it was my turn to apologize—I simply couldn't keep my eyes open. I had been tired to begin with and the drive had used up my little remaining energy.

I tumbled into a big wooden bed and fell asleep within minutes—but I woke up several times during the night, which was unusual for me. Once I heard someone prowling about downstairs, and I wondered if Monton was afflicted with insomnia.

When I came down to the kitchen the next morning, he was sitting over a cup of coffee. He greeted me heartily but it was obvious to me that he hadn't slept well. His face was lined, his eyes red-rimmed. I concluded that something was preying on his mind, but I decided not to question him at that time.

After finishing my bacon and eggs, I went outside and walked around. Overnight the temperature had dropped—a chill rode the wind. Far overhead geese honked past, heading south, and a few red leaves skittered at my feet.

I wrote in my sitting room most of the morning. After a sandwich lunch, I settled down for a long talk with Monton. He appeared to welcome my company, but when I

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tried to probe into the cause of his evident malaise, he became evasive and taciturn. I finally gave up and went for a late afternoon walk along the dirt road which passed the house.

That evening I insisted on helping with the dinner chores. Monton acquiesced after mild objections. After dinner we sat down with the brandy bottle, but my host persistently steered the conversation away from himself.

Soon I settled into a flexible but fairly consistent routine. After breakfast and a brief stroll outside, I would go up to my room and write for about two hours. Correspondence and a bit of random reading took up another hour. I would then descend for a light lunch and a drink or two. Monton and I would talk for an hour or so and after that I would go for a long ramble along the country roads. Occasionally Monton would join me, but not often. Although something about the house apparently kept him unsettled and nervous, he was nevertheless reluctant to leave it.

Sometimes I'd walk into Juniper Hill and stop at the village store. Usually I'd find three or four oldtimers gathered around the traditional potbellied stove, even though that venerable antique didn't yet hold a fire.

Mr. Mays, the storekeeper, often served crackers and cheese with a nip of sherry. It was a pleasant interval.

It was over these afternoon "cracker-barrel" sessions that I learned more about Monton. To my surprise, I found that he had entertained another guest for several months prior to my own arrival. This gentleman was known only as Shiman and nobody seemed to have much information about him. It was believed that he had left abruptly, in a huff, after a misunderstanding of some kind with Monton.

The name Shiman seemed faintly familiar to me and yet for the proverbial king's ransom I couldn't place it.

One evening, after several brandies, I took my courage into my tongue and broached the name to Monton.

He started up from his chair, almost spilling his brandy, and his pale face turned paste-gray. "Where did you hear that name?" he asked ferociously. "I suppose those village gossips have been blatting again!"

Although his attitude offended me, I tried to dismiss the matter. I waved a hand deprecatingly. "It's really of no consequence, Monton. We'll talk about something else."

He settled back into his chair with a sigh and emptied his brandy glass. "I'm sorry, Brennan. My

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nerves haven't been right for some time." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "The truth is, I wasn't going to mention his name, because his entire visit here was an ordeal for me and he finally left in a rage." He shook his head. "I invited him up in good faith and he took advantage of me in every way. He drank liquor like water, ran up bills in my name at the general store, wore my clothes, stole money—and then became savage and abusive when I charged him with it. He walked out during the middle of the night after stealing everything portable he could get his hands on. He hiked down to Juniper Hill, I guess, and then took the morning bus out. I could have brought charges, but I was so glad to get rid of him, I just let it go."

"The kind of house guest one has in a nightmare," I remarked. "I trust *I'll* measure up a bit better!"

Monton looked into my eyes earnestly. "Brennan, you're welcome to stay for a year, if you want. I'm just sorry that I'm not a better host."

I thanked him, assured him that his hospitality left nothing to be desired, and after a final nightcap went up to bed.

However, I couldn't fall asleep. The name Shiman kept going around in my weary head. Finally, toward morning, just as I was about to doze off, it came to me. Shiman had worked with Monton in the bank—another teller, I believe. Monton had mentioned his name on several occasions. If memory served me right, the two of them had sometimes gone to the racetrack together. I turned over and went to sleep, but some subconscious stratum of my mind kept restlessly awake. I finally had a real nightmare in which the elusive Shiman, veiled in black, stole into my room and crept stealthily toward my bed. I awoke with a yell and saw sunlight coming through the window.

The next day I told Monton I had decided to return to the city, but he pleaded so strongly for me to remain a time longer that I finally agreed.

The truth was, although Monton's nervous state worried me a great deal, the quiet house, the peace of the countryside and the clean air soothed and rested me. I hated to leave. Monton, moreover, refused to accept a cent for board, although he at length did agree that I might go into Juniper Hill and buy a supply of groceries once a week.

My writing progressed well; my appetite embarrassed me; and I thoroughly enjoyed the lack of urban interruptions—but for some reason my sleep pattern remained broken and erratic.

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I knew definitely by now that Monton prowled the house at least half the night—but something more than that fretted me after midnight. I seemed always to be sleeping in the aura of nightmare. At first I could not put a name to it, nor describe it even in general terms, yet it continued to hover relentlessly on the edge of sleep.

Gradually, very gradually, it assumed some kind of shape in the shifting landscape of dreams. *Something* seemed to be gliding or stalking across the field behind Monton's house. Sometimes it moved across the meadow in a line more or less parallel to the house; other times it approached the house directly. I could never see it clearly, but whatever it was, it filled me with paralyzing fright. I felt that I would rather face a charging bull or a rabid dog than that amorphous thing which came out of the woods or the adjacent marsh at the far end of the meadow and crawled or shambled toward the house.

I didn't mention my nightmare to Monton. His nervous affliction worsened daily, and he frequently trembled so violently it became difficult for him to hold a glass in his hand. I became convinced that he actually slept no more than a few minutes during the night. He drank too much, but I was familiar with the symptoms of delirium tremens; I knew his frayed nerves were caused by something else.

Autumn closed in swiftly. Cold winds came over the high barren fields, keening around the old house like lost souls lamenting their wasted lives. Monton, trembling and cadaverous, prowled the house endlessly, by day and by night, pleading with me not to leave and yet stubbornly refusing to reveal the source of the terror which had turned him into a caricature of his former self.

My writing ceased and I took longer walks. I suppose, also, that I drank too much. My nights were filled with feverish dreams of darkness and dread. Again and again the same nightmare, with subtle variations, repeated itself: *something* crawled out of the marsh at the far end of the field and squirmed toward the rear of the house. It always seemed to be partially obscured in the hazy moonlight, or by the mist which hovered over the meadow at night, and for this I was infinitely grateful. The nightmare glimpses which I caught of it usually awakened me abruptly, shaking with fright. The hideous thing appeared to be eternally undergoing some unspeakable metamorphosis, but I could never be sure what that metamorphosis was. Either it had once been human and was in the process of rapidly reverting to its

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elemental slime—or it was a fearfully-animated skeletal shape which was striving furiously to become human again. In any case, it writhed and squirmed in a manner beyond my poor powers of description.

Late one afternoon, as I entered the house after a long walk, I found Monton, brandy bottle in hand, scrutinizing a calendar. He whirled about, staring at me like a madman.

"This is the date!" he screamed. "This is the date!" He emptied the bottle in one gulp and began laughing hysterically.

It took me a half hour to drag him away from the liquor cabinet and get him settled into a chair, but I would not be put off. I felt that I could tolerate no more. "You will remain in that chair—without another drink—until you tell me what this is all about!" I warned him sternly.

Haggard, weak with terror, he finally agreed. He told me that some years ago he and his former house guest, Shiman, had become interested in the occult. They had eventually agreed that, if possible, whoever died first would attempt to return sometime during the twenty-four hour period of the other's next birthday. This was Monton's birthday. He had apparently prowled through the house in a state of terror since early morning.

Under other circumstances, the whole affair might have seemed idiotic; it reminded me of the kind of pact I might have made as an over-imaginative adolescent. But the fear which rode Monton was intense. It was impossible to shrug off an episode which reduced a fellow human being to such a state.

Aside from this, however, to the best of my knowledge Shiman was very much alive. According to Monton himself, Shiman, one midnight, had stolen whatever he could carry, hiked down to Juniper Hill and left town on the morning bus.

When I mentioned this, Monton shook his head. "He left here alive and healthy, but he's dead. I can't prove it, but I *feel* it! I possess certain psychic qualities. I have had . . . premonitions . . . of his return—and I can't face it. I *cannot*!" He arose, looking around wildly.

I got him seated again, with an effort. I sighed. "All right. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, we accept your statement that Shiman is dead and that you've had premonitions of his return. What have *you* to fear? You, not he, were the aggrieved party. He abused your hospitality, stole what he could carry and crept away while you slept. Why on earth should you fear *him*?"

He glared at me. "Fool!" he screamed. "Can't you comprehend

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anything? We had many arguments—violent arguments. *He hated me when he left and he will hate me even more when he returns!"*

He slumped back weakly in his chair. In spite of his harsh language, I felt sorry for him. I resolved that the very next day I would attempt to secure psychiatric help for Monton. I concluded he was definitely deranged. Unaided, I felt there was little I could do to rid him of his obsession. My one hope was that if the twenty-four hours of his birthday passed uneventfully, he would see the absurdity of his beliefs and return to some semblance of normality.

After his outburst, Monton became mute and sullen, refusing to leave his chair except to bring more brandy from the liquor cabinet.

I finally went upstairs to bed with many misgivings. At what hour I eventually fell asleep I cannot say; and I am equally uncertain whether I actually woke up, or experienced only another nightmare more terrible than the previous ones.

In any case, it appeared to me that I did wake up shortly before midnight. The entire house seemed uncannily quiet. Beyond that, a deadly chill pervaded it, a chill which pierced through the counterpane and blankets which covered me. I lay shivering with cold, but worse than that was a feeling of foreboding, an acute apprehension, which tightened about me like coils of ice. Terror rendered me immobile. In a quite literal sense, I was unable to move.

As I lay helpless, a terrific crash shook the house. Along with the splintering of panels, I heard the screech of metal hinges torn from heavy wood.

A minute later a scream, which will echo in my mind for the rest of my life, rang through the house. It was a scream of ultimate dread and final despair; a scream of such intensity, it seemed to rupture the throat from which it burst.

There came a brief scuffling and then I heard a dragging, shambling sound. It started in Monton's room downstairs and proceeded across the livingroom, down a corridor, through the kitchen and onto the rear porch. I heard something thudding slowly down the porch steps and finally, mercifully, there was silence.

Either I passed from nightmare into a stupor of sleep, or I fainted. I shall never know. When I did wake up, gray light was filtering through the window. The house was a cave of ice, utterly silent.

My fingers were so numb, it took me twice as long as usual to dress. I felt strongly inclined to remain huddled in bed, but I knew that something was terribly amiss

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belowstairs. That fearful scream still rang in my head as if it had been uttered only minutes before. I tried to convince myself that I had merely dreamed it, but in this I was not very successful.

Shuddering, I stole down the stairs. Cold air was blowing all through the house; the central heating system seemed to have been overwhelmed. I heard the furnace pounding away, but there was no heat.

The door to Monton's room was open. I knocked once and entered—Monton was not there. The bed had not been slept in, and a chair was overturned.

I proceeded down the corridor to the kitchen and here I found the source of freezing air which had invaded the house. The kitchen door, leading to the rear porch, had been completely wrenched loose. The oak panels were smashed, the heavy brass hinges torn from the wood. Cold wind poured through the doorway, flooding the house.

As I looked outside, I saw that a heavy frost had come during the night. Grass everywhere was white and flattened. The fields glittered a little in the first watery light.

If there had been no frost, Monton's disappearance might never have been solved, and I might not be resigned to nightmares for the rest of my life.

The frost must have settled in by midnight, because I could see traces of footprints on the porch, and beyond the porch, along the narrow path which cut through the grass toward the open field at the back of the house.

I went back up to my room, put on boots and a topcoat, and returned to the path at the rear of the house. The frost was thick; the sun was not yet high enough to melt it, and I had little difficulty in following the prints. Sometimes they blurred, or wavered out of the path, and at intervals there were patches where a struggle appeared to have taken place. The frost-gilded grass would be trampled down and crushed over an area of several feet. Then the wavering prints would begin again.

As I studied them, I felt the hair on the back of my neck stirring. There were *two* sets of prints, not distinct, but unmistakable. One set was made by ordinary street shoes, but the other set seemed to have been made by someone *without* shoes, who had terribly thin and bony feet.

Shuddering, I followed the tracks across the field to the stone wall which separated it from the adjacent marsh area. For a few yards the prints trailed along the wall; then I saw where they had crossed the wall and led away on the other

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side, going jerkily but resolutely on.

Climbing the wall, I followed them straight into the middle of the marsh. At length I reached a spot where a furious struggle appeared to have taken place. The grass and spongy turf were torn up over a large area and I detected a few spots of blood. The prints began again, deeper into the marsh. Suddenly, as I followed, I sank almost to my knees in the wet ground. Looking up in alarm, I saw a sign nailed to a post only a few yards away: *Danger. Quicksand.* The letters were painted red. Pulling myself from the semiliquescent mud with great difficulty, I hastily backtracked.

Peering ahead, I saw that the prints continued on past the sign as far as I could see.

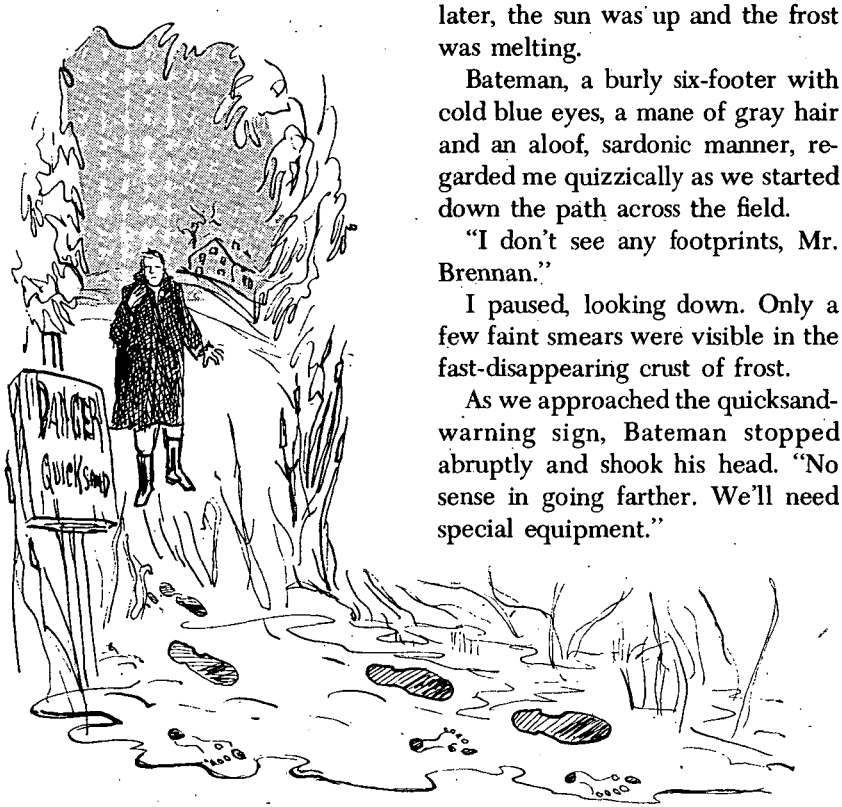
Hurrying back to the house, I telephoned Sheriff Bateman. By the time he arrived, nearly an hour later, the sun was up and the frost was melting.

Bateman, a burly six-footer with cold blue eyes, a mane of gray hair and an aloof, sardonic manner, regarded me quizzically as we started down the path across the field.

"I don't see any footprints, Mr. Brennan."

I paused, looking down. Only a few faint smears were visible in the fast-disappearing crust of frost.

As we approached the quicksand-warning sign, Bateman stopped abruptly and shook his head. "No sense in going farther. We'll need special equipment."



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The sheriff leaned out of his car just before he drove off. "You'd better stay around, Mr. Brennan. Just in case."

"In other words, I'm the chief suspect?"

He shrugged. "You were here when it happened." He started his car, scrutinizing me shrewdly. "Can you name another suspect?" He drove off before I could answer.

In spite of his suspicions, however, Bateman decided to go along with my story. Two days later workmen moved in, heavy plank platforms were unloaded from trucks and massive dredging equipment was hauled into the marsh area.

It seemed to me that tons of water, mud and sand were siphoned, scooped or shoveled away and dumped into the middle of the open field. The huge mass became mountainous.

On the third day Bateman stopped in at the house for hot coffee. He stared out moodily at a few flakes of whirling snow. "If we don't find anything today, we'll have to pull out the crews."

By late afternoon a strong wind arose, scattering the snow squalls in every direction. The clank and roar of dredging equipment became louder as the wind shifted.

I decided I could stand the house no longer. Bundling up in scarf, gloves and Windbreaker, I walked down to the marsh.

The work crews regarded me with obvious hostility. They were now convinced that I had told Sheriff Bateman a cock-and-bull story and that they had been wasting their time.

One of them glanced at his watch and nodded. "Two hours to go and we're finished with this crazy job."

I stood and watched the jaws of a giant scoop plunge into the morass and come up filled with dripping muck which was dropped into the back of a nearby truck.

On the third drop one of the workmen yelled. The scoop was shut off and everyone rushed toward the truck. Shovels flew. In less than ten minutes something was hauled from the truck and laid out on a piece of canvas. It was so covered with mud and slime, only its general outline was visible, but still I shuddered.

A workman came up with a hose and began washing it off. I think that all of us stood there petrified with horror as the thing was clearly revealed. I know that I did.

It was Monton, all right. Even after nearly a week's immersion, his features were so twisted by a frightful grimace of terror that I had difficulty in identifying him. I recognized his clothes, of course, and knew there could be no mistake.

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However, it wasn't the look of horror congealed on Monton's face which kept us standing there speechless. It was the other thing.

Twisted around the corpse of Monton, like some hideous half-human vine, was a decayed skeletal shape with patches of shrunken skin and shreds of clothing still clinging to its rotted frame. The thing's bony arms were wound tightly around Monton's waist and the exposed teeth of its fleshless mouth were sunken deeply into his throat.

At the inquest, which I had to attend, the verdict was suicide. Monton, it was decided, remorseful over the murder of Shiman, had thrown himself into the quicksand marsh at the same spot where he had dropped Shiman's body. Somehow, by a weird coincidence, the two corpses had become entangled many feet below the surface.

No mention was made of the skeletal arms locked around Monton's waist, nor of the teeth which had bitten savagely into his throat—nor of the fact that the skeleton shape—identified as Shiman's by dental charts—was without shoes.

It was decided that the rear door of the house had been wrenched off its hinges by a sudden blast of unusually strong wind.

Later, I learned that Monton had no uncle. He had apparently embezzled sizable sums from the bank for many years. When suspicions were finally aroused, he had abruptly resigned and purchased the farm in Tunxis. The bank examiners, while able to ascertain the approximate amount of the fund shortage, had been unable to prove Monton's guilt.

The key to the proof of his guilt lay with Shiman, a fellow teller, who refused to talk and also resigned. Shortly after Monton bought his farmhouse, Shiman had descended on him and commenced blackmail operations. Eventually Monton had rebelled and killed him.

Poor Monton! I still have nightmares about the dead thing which crawled out of the quicksand and came for him on his final birthday.

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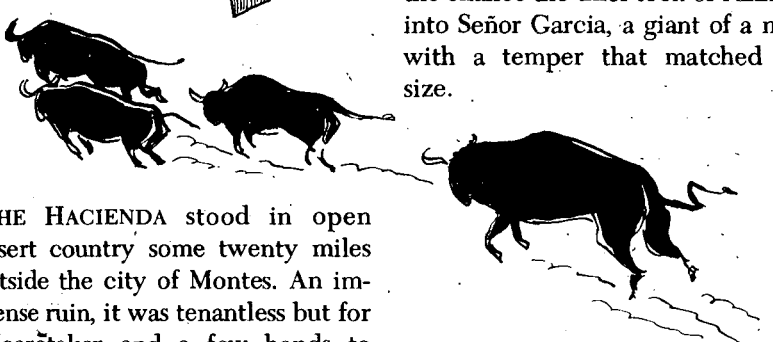
The nature of the purloined is, of course, frequently a clue to the purloiner.

Garcia's Bulls



THE HACIENDA stood in open desert country some twenty miles outside the city of Montes. An immense ruin, it was tenantless but for a caretaker and a few hands to watch over Pedro Garcia's bulls, which were very special. All were black, huge, mean, notable for their courage, and bred to fight. In the Plaza de Toros on the dusty outskirts of Montes, no other bulls were acceptable and a corrida without them was unthinkable. Just as unthinkable was the idea of anyone making off with one of these wild brutes—and yet five of them had vanished without trace.

Did they wander off into the empty desert? No, the barbed-wire fences were intact. Nor had they been cut and rejoined, indicating that the bulls had been taken through the gate, which bespoke nerve to a high degree, considering the chance the thief took of running into Señor Garcia, a giant of a man with a temper that matched his size.

But who, in the first place, would be foolish enough to make off with the bulls, much less risk a chance meeting with their owner? This, exactly, was the question Detective Victor Fiala put to Chief Lopez in his office. A reasonable question, but Lopez, a not altogether reason-

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able person, said, "That's for you to figure out, Victor."

"I just hope this isn't a joke," answered Fiala.

"Hardly," said Lopez. "Garcia's sworn to get the thief and you know what that means."

"I know, but why would anyone steal the bulls?"

This from Fiala, who should know better? Lopez smiled. "Thieves are thieves, aren't they?" he allowed. "One will steal from a poor box, another, given the chance, will abstract your eyeballs. In other words, a thief will steal anything, as you are fond of saying."

"Anything within reason," Fiala put in.

"Five prize bulls. Isn't that within reason, Victor?"

"Yes and no. The thief can't sell them for the ring with Garcia's brand on them. Nobody'd touch them."

"Admitted," said Lopez, "but someone made off with them, and that's the point."

Fiala shook his head. "Blooded bulls. Any one of them good for breeding, but where could one hide five of them? Those brutes need plenty of room on an open range." The old detective shook his head again. "I'm afraid the thief doesn't intend to breed them."

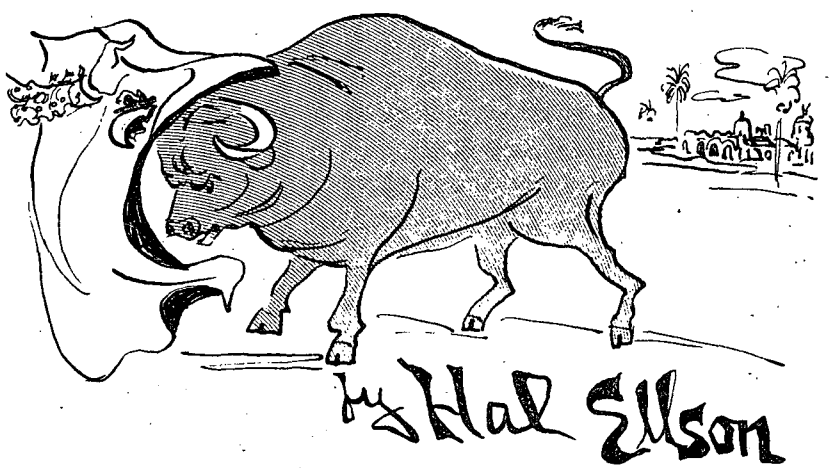
"Which leads us to what?"

"They may have been butchered."

"What I was thinking," said Lopez.

"May have been," Fiala said, "but I doubt it."

"And what causes you to doubt they were butchered? They'd make a lot of steak."



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"Tough steak, for one thing, Señor, but my doubt stems from another source. I can't imagine anyone but a madman slaughtering a Garcia bull."

"Hm," said Lopez, his eyes lighting up. "That may well be your lead."

"My lead?"

"A madman. That's the answer to this mess. No one else would commit such an act."

Fiala frowned, weighed the theory and found it wanting. The butchering might occur to a madman, but how would such a person, with a mind so disjointed, be able to plan, organize and carry out the abduction of five intractable bulls, each capable of killing a man with a flick of a horn? This he explained, but Lopez wouldn't have it.

"The fellow has to be mad," he insisted. "No citizen in his right mind would even dream of such an act. But enough of talk, Victor. Garcia wants action, and so do I. There's the door. Get on your burro and go to work."

There was no burro, of course. Fiala's car awaited him outside headquarters. A small moon-faced boy in bare feet stood beside it. "Clean your windshield?" he greeted the detective.

"Clean it, but no spit on the rag," Fiala answered and walked on, crossing the blistering plaza to the Blue Moon Restaurant. Coffee was in order, black and bitter to stir his brain. He ordered, and the counterman served him.

"What about Garcia's bulls?" that one said.

"What about them?"

"A sacrilege to steal them, no?"

"A mortal sin, at least."

"Are you working on the case?"

"I am."

"Any leads?"

"None as yet." Fiala drank half his coffee and asked, "What kind of person do you think would steal Garcia's bulls?"

The counterman splayed his hands, arched his brows and said, "Only a crazy man."

Another Lopez. Fiala finished his coffee, left and crossed the plaza to his car. The boy had cleaned the windshield and was waiting for his pay. Fiala handed him a peso and drove to the Black Cat. The cantina was empty, Pancho enjoying a small beer behind the bar.

"Any news on the bulls?" he asked as Fiala stepped through the side door.

"Too early yet. Let me have a small one. It's hot out there."

Pancho opened a bottle and shook his bald head. "Bad, bad," he sighed. "What kind of bullfights will we see if Garcia's stock is stolen?"

"They may as well close the

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arena and throw the key away. What's to be done? The thief will have to be caught, but . . ."

"That's easier said than done." Pancho wiped his bald head. "I don't envy you, Victor, especially on this one."

"Meaning what?"

"Anyone who'd dare steal those bulls would be a dangerous person to deal with. You'll have to watch your step."

"So you think the thief is—"

"A killer. What else could he be?" Pancho lifted his beer. "Here's luck, and take care."

The rustler a killer? An unpleasant thought. Fiala finished his drink and left. The sun was hotter now, not a breath of air stirring. He drove off, turned into a wide and empty highway sentineled by two columns of enormous royal palms. This causeway led directly into the desert that encroached on the northern sector of the city and here the sun fired a white and dusty landscape where nothing moved.

A mile outside the city he swung off the highway and followed a winding road that had been pounded into definition by the hooves of burros and heavy-wheeled oxcarts. An alkali-white trail to nowhere, but finally a squat ranch house surrounded by ancient walls appeared in the distance. Cattle resting in the shade of the trees lifted their heads as the car drew close. A rough mesquite fence encircled the house. Fiala braked at the gate, stepped from the car, and a tall, broad-shouldered man came from the ranch house, a holstered pistol on his right hip, a white Texan hat angled on his head.

Fiala went through the gate, and Señor Garcia greeted and invited him inside where he opened two bottles of beer. They saluted, drank and got down to business. Did Garcia have any idea how his bulls had been stolen?

"I've no idea," said Garcia, "but the thief's taken the last." He slapped his holster. "I'm staying at the Hacienda from tonight on."

"You're angry and I can't blame you," said Fiala, "but bullets won't settle the matter."

"You think not?"

"I know. Kill someone and you're in trouble."

"Not if there are no witnesses and no body."

"Meaning what? You'll bury the fellow in the desert?" Fiala shrugged. "Bodies have a way of showing up and the dead have a way of talking, but that's beside the point. I don't want to go after you, but if I must I will. Meantime let me track down the thief."

"Thanks, but I didn't send for you."

"I know, but Lopez gave me the

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assignment. I didn't ask for it."

"I appreciate the favor; the help I don't need."

Fiala grinned to himself, knowing Garcia well. A good fellow, but a hothead who would certainly do as he said and damn himself in the bargain. *Stop him, but how?* He shook his head. "This is going to be difficult enough," he said, "and now you're complicating things."

"If I settle the matter myself?"

"Exactly. You're doubling my load, and I'm getting a little too old for that sort of thing."

"Ah, you're asking for sympathy."

"No, simply stating the truth. I'd like your cooperation."

"No promises, Victor," Garcia said, relenting a bit. "I'll try not to use the gun, but I'll be waiting at the gate to the Hacienda tonight."

"You didn't have a man there?"

"I did, but he could have been bought off."

Fiala shook his head. "I doubt if he'd take the chance, and doubly I doubt that the bulls passed through the gate."

"The fence wasn't cut. My men went over every inch of it."

Nodding, Fiala let that pass and said, "I'm going to the Hacienda and look around. Care to go along?"

"A waste of time, but . . ."

A long drive deeper into the desert brought them to the Hacienda which stood a quarter-mile back from the road in an area below the desert floor. From the road itself there was no sign of the Hacienda. A hundred yards past the gate it came into view, a massive white ruin which had been built during the Conquest. As the car stopped in front of it, Fiala shook his head, as impressed as on those other occasions when he'd seen it. "Beautiful and sad," he remarked. "Three hundred years of history coming to an end."

"Everything ends," Garcia shrugged.

"Have you been inside?"

"Only in the chapel. The other rooms are too dangerous to chance."

"What about the corral?"

"Nothing's there."

Nothing? Fiala smiled to himself. Garcia, he realized, had rented the land surrounding it for his bulls and the Hacienda itself didn't concern him in the least. "A lot of history here," the detective remarked. "One wonders how the Spaniards found this spot. They must have been a very tough and remarkable breed of men."

"I suppose they were," Garcia conceded.

"They were quite resourceful. They found water here and built the Hacienda around it."

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"Around it? The stream is over there, outside the walls."

"True," said Fiala. "But it goes underground inside the corral."

"I know of the well, not of the underground stream."

"It's there, all right."

"If you say so," Garcia answered. "Now, let's get down to business. Do you want to question my men? Not that it will do much good. They don't know anything."

"In that case, there's no point in speaking to them."

"And no point in coming here."

Fiala shrugged. "The ride was pleasant, and this place." He nodded toward the Hacienda. "Beautiful and sad. If you don't mind, I'd like to walk around it."

"As you wish, but don't be long, and take care. You don't know what may topple on your head."

Fiala laughed and walked off, following the south wall. Gaping cracks and mounds of debris testified to the pillage of time. *Sad. Sad.* He shook his head, moved on, came to an opening in the wall and stepped through; worm-eaten rafters, a huge hole in the ceiling, rubble on the dirt floor of a muted room . . . *Is it safe to cross?* Quickly he passed through it and entered the corral, an open area within the walls and stark empty but for what appeared to be a squat hut at its center. For some moments he surveyed the corral, then approached the squat structure, stopped and examined the ground before it.

Some minutes later, he returned to the car, found Garcia dozing in the front seat and climbed behind the wheel. "Ah, so you're back, Victor," Garcia said, opening his eyes. "Find anything?"

Fiala shrugged, started the car, drove to the road, then on to the ranch house. Garcia climbed out. "Back where we started and nothing accomplished," he said.

"A point of view, Señor."

"You mean you found something at the Hacienda?"

"Perhaps, but I'd rather not discuss it just now. Meantime, have I your word that you won't use your pistol?"

Garcia smiled. "Let's say I won't shoot the thief if I catch up with him, but I may tap him on the head."

"Then you're going to lay for him?"

"At the gate to the Hacienda."

"A waste of time. Your bulls weren't taken through it."

"You sound sure of that, but how do you know?"

"Let's say I have a hunch, shall we? And now I'm off to gather a little information. Adios, Señor."

The ride back across the desert was uneventful. Fiala was in no

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hurry and was rather pleased with the way things were going. For one, he was certain he knew how the bulls had been taken from the Hacienda. A guess on his part plus his visit there had convinced him, but this, if he were correct, was the easy part. The question that bothered him now? Who was the thief, and how had he disposed of the bulls? If a killer were involved, then violence no doubt would ensue.

If only I were ten years younger, he thought, doubting his chances of outshooting the rustler in an encounter with guns. Now the car moved out of the desert and speared at the shadows cast by giant palms; shadows but no people, the sun blistering Montes, the city silent and dozing; a day unfit for a dog. The car rolled into the plaza behind headquarters, braked at the Blue Moon Restaurant.

Fiala got out. As expected, the Blue Moon was empty. *Not even a fly to nag one,* he thought, and stepped outside. A man in a black suit and turned-around collar was coming toward him, his face gaunt and waxen—Padre Mendoza, whose way was different, to say the least. An odd one, his chief concern was the army of ragged, barefooted shoe-shine boys who worked the plazas; that was his flock.

"Padre." Fiala bowed his head.

The priest stopped. His dark eyes flashed as if fire smoldered in their depths. "Victor, you haven't forgotten the contribution?"

"No, but it will take a little time collecting the money. Pay day should do it."

"The best time, before the money goes on foolishness. Forgive me for speaking like this, but my boys are always in need. You understand?"

"Of course."

"But most of the others don't. All the money goes to Boys Town. The kids there have everything, and mine have nothing."

True. Those of wealth and importance in Montes supported Boys Town, but for the padre's ragged army, nothing. Fiala nodded in sympathy. *The padre's cause is a better one, but the man himself? A fanatic who doesn't get off one's back till he gets what he wants for his boys. And what he wants now is a school.*

He mentioned this to Fiala and said, "The money you collect from your co-workers will go toward that."

"A school?" said Fiala. "The money you get from us will never cover it."

"Ah, but I already have the building, an abandoned schoolhouse across the riverbed. The mayor's wife used her influence on her husband, so . . ." The padre shrugged. "A little paint, some nails for the

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broken benches, glass for the windows and . . ."

"And the teacher?"

"Myself. Classes will be at night when the little fellows finish shining shoes and after they've eaten. A full belly first. Isn't that right?" The padre laughed and his eyes flashed. He was a man with a mission, and now he had to run. Someone had promised a donation of pencils and paper for the school. "I expect to see you pay day," he said, and hurried off as if the Devil were at his heels.

And in this heat, thought Fiala, nodding and turning to the gutter. He crossed it and entered the plaza. On one of the paths an ancient sour-orange tree shadowed a bench. He sat, lit a cigarette and thought of the padre flying to his mission. *A nice fellow, but a bit of a dreamer.* He sighed. *A bit? More than that. Much more. What had he said about a school for the shoe-shine boys?* "Ridiculous," he mumbled and looked about.

Five minutes later he drove up to the Black Cat, and entered the cantina by the side door.

"Back?" said Pancho from behind the bar.

"Back."

"Anything new?"

"Nothing. I'll have a double tequila."

Pancho arched his brows, filled the glass and watched its contents vanish as if it were water.

"Many thanks. I needed that," Fiala said and out he went as fast as he'd come.

Tequila in his blood and a wild thought in his brain, off he drove through the dozing streets. A five-minute run and he turned into the city's main plaza and there, as if on a carrousel, twice he rounded it before he made up his mind to go where he did not want to go.

A short drive brought him to a bridge spanning a dry riverbed. Abruptly beyond the bridge, the streets rose sharply, pavement vanished, replaced by mud and potholes. Upward the car climbed, a rough going and a passage through an area of crumbling adobes and rickety shacks. High up on the mountain slope a white stucco structure stood by itself, a forlorn sight, without windows and its massive door hanging precariously on a single hinge—Padre Mendoza's school.

Fiala braked the car, got out, stared at the forlorn structure and shook his head. He went to the door, looked inside. Nothing but rubble. Turning away, he gazed at a cluster of decrepit shacks standing thirty yards away. One, larger than the rest, served as a gathering place for the padre's shoe-shine boys and it was here that he served

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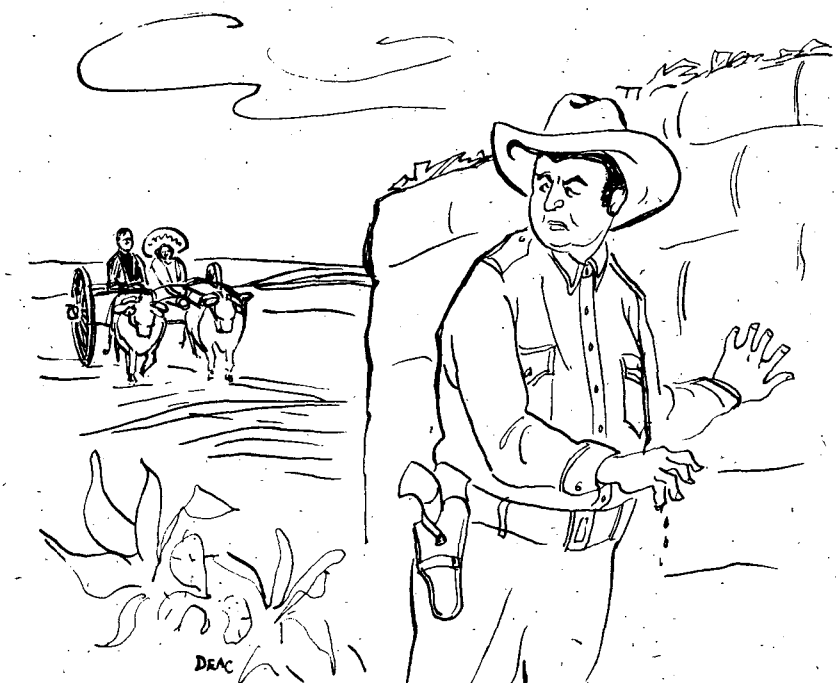
them meals, taught them the fear of God and housed those who were homeless. Siding the shack and topped by broken glass stood a crude wall which formed a small corral. Fiala turned from it, changed his mind and approached the wall. Six feet of adobe confronted him, topped with glittering fragments of glass. *Is the other side worth a look?* He reached up carefully, gripped the wall, pulled himself up, looked, then dropped back to the ground.

A creaking of wheels and slow clopping of hooves brought him about. Coming toward him was an oxcart with two men aboard, one a grizzled old fellow wearing a sombrero, the other Padre Mendoza. The cart came abreast of Fiala and halted. The padre jumped down, his



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eyes flashing. "Ah, you came to see my school?"

"No, Padre."

"Then you brought a contribution?"

"No, Padre."

"Then why?" The padre stopped. His eyes flashed fire, he seemed about to lunge at the detective, caught himself and began to tremble violently. The trembling ceased abruptly and he stiffened, his eyes flashed again. He looked like a trapped and wounded animal ready to fight to the last.

Fiala felt sorry for him, sorry for the shoe-shine boys that no one cared about. *Who will shelter the homeless ones and feed the hungry?*

"Garcia's bulls." The words hissed through the padre's clenched teeth. "That's why you're here."

Fiala nodded. "I'm sorry, Padre. You were the last person I suspected. I didn't want to believe it, but certain conclusions forced me to."

"And what do you expect to charge me with?" The padre was bristling now.

"You know what the charge will be."

The padre shook his head and sent Fiala a glacial smile. "That I made off with Señor Garcia's bulls? No, Victor."

"You deny the charge?"

"Let us say that I took from the rich to give to the poor, and would one define that as stealing? To give is sacred, is it not?"

From the moment he'd got into this business, Fiala had anticipated an awkward scene such as this was shaping into, and now he felt embarrassed, for the law was the law, and yet the padre had a point. He admitted to this, and the padre said, "Besides, Señor Garcia is very wealthy. He can well afford those bulls."

"No doubt, but who gave you the right—"

"To give another man's property away?" The padre smiled again, his eyes blazed wildly. A saint bent on martyrdom or a fanatic moved by compulsions he did not understand might have looked as he did. "God gave me the right," he said, striking his chest.

Is he invoking the Creator as a shield, or does he truly believe this? But more to the point, would God grant anyone the right to steal? Fiala put that to him, thinking he'd stop the padre. It didn't work.

"To the needy He granted me the right to give," the padre answered. "And I did just that."

"And slaughtered five bulls."

"With more mercy than they'd ever receive in the arena. They died for a good cause, not to the stupid applause of the *aficionados* of death."

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"That is a lot of meat."

"Yes, instead of tortillas and beans, plenty of steak for my boys, and what they couldn't put away, you saw when you looked over the wall."

Fiala nodded. Beyond the wall jerked beef drying in the sun and blackened with legions of flies; evidence to doom the padre.

The padre smiled. "Do you still charge me?" he asked. "Or do you acknowledge that God's law transcends man's?"

Fiala shrugged. "For the record," he said, "perhaps we can say the bulls were taken by an unknown party and are not recoverable."

The padre smiled, his manner changed, eyes softened. "Concerning the brutes," he said, "how did you know I was the one?"

"A combination of things and a process of elimination, Padre, but most of all yourself when we met earlier and you spoke of your school and the boys. 'Full bellies first,' that was the phrase you used. It stuck in my mind."

"Gave myself away. Ah, I should have known better."

"It happens to the best of us." Fiala shrugged. "And now I must leave to unravel some complications with Chief Lopez. Also, Señor Garcia will have to be placated, and you can help, Padre, if you'll give your word that you won't go near the Hacienda again."

"But . . ."

"No buts. Garcia's staying at the Hacienda and wearing a gun which he intends to use. Now, what of the shoe-shine boys? Who'll feed and care for them if something happens to you?"

The padre, hearing the threat to his boys, conceded, and Fiala drove off.

Back to headquarters he went, confronted Lopez and dropped the bomb: Padre Mendoza was the one who'd made off with Garcia's bulls, but he hadn't arrested him, pointing out that to throw him in the lockup wouldn't do, for the people of Montes, without doubt, would storm the jail and carry the padre out like a martyred saint.

Lopez saw the point, but a fly was in the ointment: how to explain the business to Garcia?

"Difficult, but if one took the bull by the horns, it could be managed," Fiala answered, and out the door he went.

Again he rode into the desert. Night caught him and on went his headlights. A half hour later, his spotlight snared a wire fence, but where was the gate in this wilderness of night? Two tall yuccas alerted him. He hit the brake, stepped from the car and a blow toppled him, a flashlight beamed in his face. Garcia stood over him.

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"Are you hurt, Victor?"

"Down but not out. Give me a hand."

Garcia pulled him to his feet and shook his head. "Too bad. I thought I had the raider."

"He's been caught. His name? Padre Mendoza," Fiala said, and quickly explained why he hadn't arrested the priest.

Garcia digested this slowly, then suddenly burst out laughing. "The man's mad," he declared, "and you were right for not arresting him. But tell me, how did he get away with my bulls?"

Fiala smiled. "Perhaps you'll recall the underground stream I mentioned in the center of the corral? Well, that's not all that's there. Just beyond the stream, the Spaniards dug a passage that leads out to the road. If the Hacienda fell to an attack—but that's ancient history. You want to know how the padre managed to control the brutes and how he got them out to the road. Simple. He had an oxcart standing by and a helper, the old fellow who handles the bulls when they arrive at the arena. He and the padre unhitched the oxen, took them through the passage and brought them back with a bull between them, somewhat the way they do when they bring the brutes into the arena-corral the day before the fight. The oxen quiet the bulls, as you well know."

"I know, but how did they get the bulls on the cart?" Garcia asked.

"Simpler yet. They had a cow aboard the cart and a ramp for the convenience of the bulls. Of course, they abducted only one bull at a time, so they must have worked all night."

"Clever," Garcia said, "but how did my men miss the action?"

"Simple again," Fiala explained. "Like you, they didn't know about the underground passage and, like everyone else, they never expected anyone would dare steal the bulls."

Garcia digested that and laughed. "Know what I think?" he said. "The padre isn't as mad as one might believe."

"Correct," said Fiala, turning to his car. "Drive you back to the ranch, Señor?"

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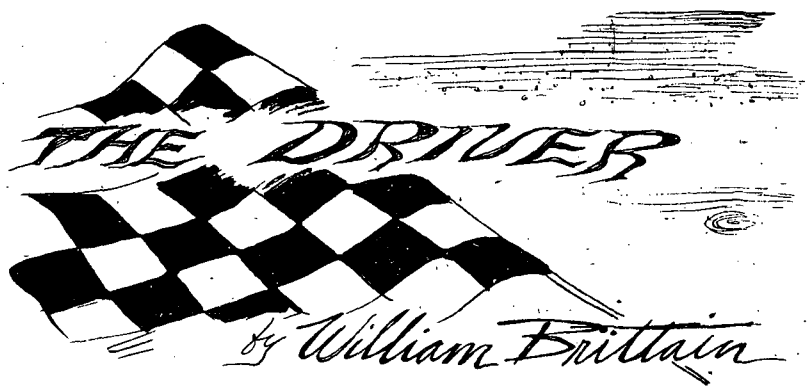
Many a life has been contingent upon the proverbial thread—embroidering thread, that is.



THE DRIVER would have found it hard to explain, even to himself, why he offered a ride to the man standing with thumb extended at the side of the road. He'd heard story after lurid story about individuals and sometimes whole families that had picked up hitchhikers who had turned out to be dangerous. The lucky ones lost only their cars and personal belongings. The unlucky ones ended up on a slab in the morgue, some with bodies marred only by a single neat bullet hole and others horribly mutilated.

Perhaps it was loneliness. He'd been driving since five o'clock that afternoon, and it was now after nine. The car was almost new, with only a thin layer of dust dulling the glistening exterior, but something was wrong with the radio; it only hissed and popped when he turned it on, so there was no human voice to relieve the tedium. There was just the ribbon of cement, coming into the beam of the headlights and passing out of sight beneath the wheels, mile after brain-numbing mile of it.

Then again, maybe it was the memory of how he himself in his younger days used to thumb his way around the country. There were times when he'd have given the shirt off his back for somebody

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to stop and give him a lift, and he remembered how rough it was when darkness fell and he still hadn't reached his destination.

The driver had just passed the Thruway tollgates at Spring Valley. According to the attendant, the road was clear at least to Albany. A little rain was expected between there and Utica, but nothing to worry about. The driver grasped the offered ticket, tucked it above the sun visor, and pulled out into the darkness that was punctuated only by the reflecting mileage indicators on posts at the edge of the road. Four to every tenth of a mile, they seemed to zip by him like glittering cats' eyes. For the next four hundred miles, he'd have no worries about traffic lights, oncoming cars or crossroads; just the reflectors, four to every tenth of a mile.

As the Thruway narrowed beyond the tollgates, the car's headlights illuminated the man standing at the edge of the road. There was a cheap cloth bag at his feet. As the car passed, the man waved his thumb, a questioning expression on his face.

On a sudden impulse, the driver braked his car to a halt. Before he could put it into reverse, the man had run up beside him and poked his head in through the open window on the passenger's side. "Ride, mister?" he asked.

The driver turned on the overhead light and looked at the man. He was wearing a jacket and tie—that was good—and even though he needed a haircut, he wasn't too shaggy, not like those hippie kids with their knapsacks and bedrolls. The man smiled shyly.

"Hop in," said the driver.

Opening the door, the man placed his bag on the floor and relaxed onto the seat with a weary sigh. The driver switched off the overhead light and pulled the car out into the center of the three northbound lanes. The speedometer needle crept quickly up to 60.

"How far are you going?" asked the driver.

"Albany," the man said. "That is, if you're not getting off the Thruway before that. I've got a job up there, but I've got to make it before eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"You'll make it. I'm going clear through to Buffalo. I'll have to let you off at the exit ramp, though."

"That'll be fine. I'm sure I can get a ride into the city from there."

In silence, they sped through the night for several minutes. "What's your name, young fellow?" asked the driver finally.

"Sam. Sam McCullough. And I'm not so young. I'm almost twenty-five."

"To me, that's young," said the driver. "You know, Sam, I'm glad to

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help you if you've got a job waiting in Albany, but don't you know it's against the law to be hitching rides on the Thruway?" He heard McCullough twisting uneasily in his seat.

"Are you going to turn me in?" McCullough asked in a small voice.

"No. Matter of fact, I don't know why I said that. I've had to thumb rides a few times in my life, too. But people trusted each other more then, I guess. I seldom had trouble getting where I wanted to go."

"I was waiting in that spot where you picked me up since it got dark," said McCullough. "I dodged into the bushes when I spotted anything looking like a police car. What I mean is, I had to get moving tonight. I couldn't take any chances on getting picked up for hitchhiking."

As the car hummed onward, bright specks of light in the darkness indicated that they were approaching a village. "That's the Suffern exit," said the driver. "Tell you what. There's a restaurant just beyond here. Suppose we stop for a few minutes. Stretch our legs and get a cup of coffee."

"I don't want any coffee," said McCullough.

"A bit down in your luck, are you? I'll buy for both of us. How's that?"

"No coffee," McCullough repeated. "I don't want anything."

"Oh. Well, I hope you don't mind waiting while I have a cup. It won't take long. I like to drink it while it's hot."

There was a rustling of cloth, followed by the sound of a zipper being pulled. *Maybe McCullough has got some money in that bag of his*, thought the driver. *Maybe . . .*

"We're not stopping, mister." McCullough's voice grated harshly in his throat.

"Listen, this is my car. I'll do what I want to. What right have you got to tell me—"

"I got this right, mister."

The barrel of the pistol ground painfully into the driver's ribs. Involuntarily, he jerked at the wheel and the car lurched toward the center divider.

"Careful," snarled McCullough.

The driver yanked the car back into the center lane and tapped at the brake.

"Don't stop," McCullough went on. "Just keep driving, not too fast, not too slow. Nice and normal, get me?"

They flashed by the restaurant and out into open country. For the fifteen miles to the Harriman interchange, neither man said a word. "The Thruway narrows to two lanes here," the driver finally whispered hoarsely.

"So? We haven't seen more than

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half a dozen cars. Just don't start getting cute if you spot a police car. No tricks with the lights or anything. I'm holding all the aces right here in my hand." McCullough waved the pistol in front of the driver's eyes.

"How—how far are you going to take me?" The driver felt the fear knotting his stomach muscles, and he wondered if he were going to be sick. Keeping one hand on the wheel, he used the other to loosen slightly the safety belt and shoulder harness which were clamped about his body.

"Far enough. The farther I go, the less likely it'll be that the police will spot me. It's too bad. I really liked that place." He tapped the dashboard loudly with the butt of the gun. "Damn that old lady," he added softly.

"Old lady? You mean your mother?" asked the driver.

"No. I mean the old broad in the house back there near Spring Valley. When I saw the man and his wife go out with the kids, I figured the house would be empty, right? Just ripe for the picking. And with the back door unlocked, too. How'd I know they'd leave granny home? I went through the whole first floor and picked up a bunch of great stuff. Portable TV, typewriter, even a good-sized roll of cash. I got this gun out of there, too. Then, just as I was ready to leave, there she was, standing on the stairs in that old nightgown, looking like she should have died ten years ago, but there was nothing wrong with her lungs. She screamed loud enough to wake up everybody in town."

"What—what did you do?" asked the driver.

McCullough rubbed the pistol thoughtfully with his free hand. "Let's just say she won't do no more screaming," he said.

"So you've gotten away," said the driver. "What happens now?"

"That depends on you. Just play it cool, the way you've been doing, and maybe you come out of this alive. Try something, and they'll be picking your body out of the ditch. I got nothing to lose."

"I won't try anything. I—I don't want to die."

"Not many people do, mister."

As the car gathered up the miles, the driver tried unsuccessfully to control the trembling in his body. He wanted to live but that, after all, was the reason McCullough was holding the gun on him. McCullough wanted to live, too.

At the Newburgh interchange, a tractor-trailer truck suddenly lurched out in front of them from the entrance ramp. The driver jammed on his brakes, and McCullough drew in a sharp breath, slamming his feet against

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the floorboard as if he could stop the car by force of will alone.

"Idiot!" snapped McCullough as the truck, doing at least eighty, growled off into the darkness and the car rocked back under control again.

The driver didn't respond. Instead, he peered thoughtfully at the pattern the headlights made on the highway ahead. Then he twisted a knob which turned on the instrument-panel lights. Darting a glance toward his passenger, he saw McCullough fingering the shoulder harness which was clipped to the roof of the car, just above the door.

"Don't touch that!" barked the driver. McCullough, startled by the commanding tone, instinctively drew his hand away. Then he smiled slowly.

"You got it all wrong, mister," he muttered softly. "I'm giving the orders, not you."

"Listen to me and listen carefully, or neither of us will be worrying about who's giving orders. Because the highway patrol will be scraping our bodies off a tree or a highway abutment."

"Keep talking, mister. It helps to pass the time."

"First of all, keep your hands off the seat belt and shoulder harness. Don't try to buckle them on."

McCullough shrugged elaborately. "I've gotten this far without them with no trouble." he said.

"Okay. Keep your hands where I can see them. Because if you don't, I'm smashing this car against the first solid thing I can find."

"You don't worry me much," said McCullough. "After all, you'd die, too. Even that safety harness wouldn't do much good in a car doing seventy."

"But that's the difference between your situation and mine. I'm going to die anyway. Isn't that right, McCullough?"

"Look, I told you if you didn't pull any smart stuff, I'd let you go. All I want is the car."

Slowly the driver shook his head. "I don't buy that," he said. "You've already murdered once. Your only chance to get away is to vanish somewhere the police can't find you. And if you let me go, I might be able to give them enough information to pick up your trail. What's another killing to you now?"

"Hell-fire! Can't you slow this thing down? We're doing almost eighty."

"Speed, that's my weapon, McCullough. At eighty miles an hour, you won't dare shoot." The driver jammed his foot on the accelerator, and the car jumped ahead even faster.

"Watch it. If your tires drop into that loose gravel at the side and you

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lose control, we'll turn over."

"Don't worry about my driving. Ever read the sport pages, McCullough? The columns about automobile racing?"

"I don't dig that stuff."

"Too bad. You might have run across my name. 'Lucky' Algood, that's who you're riding with tonight. Two-time winner of the Grand Prix, Le Mans and Watkins Glen. I never spun out on a racing circuit in my life, and I don't intend to do it now."

"What are you gonna— Look out! You almost clipped that car we passed."

"The gun, McCullough."

"What about the gun?"

"Throw it out the window. That's my price for slowing down."

McCullough chuckled slightly. "You must think I'm crazy. If I throw this gun away, you turn me over to a cop and I face a murder rap. But if you crash, maybe there's a chance I walk away. I'll keep the gun."

"Besides racing," said the driver, "I'm also a safety consultant for an automotive company. I'll bet you didn't know that, either."

"So?"

"So you might try figuring your chances of walking away from a head-on crash at eighty miles per hour. Maybe I can help you. We did some tests, out at the test track. Of course, fifty was the fastest any of our test cars went, but it'll give you some idea of what'll happen to you.

"In the first tenth of a second after the car hits, the front fenders, the grille and the radiator are mashed into crumpled metal. In the next tenth of a second, the hood smashes and pops up in front of the windshield, while the back wheels lift off the ground. You see, the front of the car will have stopped, but the rear keeps right on coming forward. By instinct, you stiffen up, just the way you did when that truck swerved in front of us. The bones in your legs break clean through at the knees."

"Cut it out, Algood!"

"Don't you want to know how you're going to die? During the third tenth of a second, your body rockets forward. The dashboard mashes your knees. At the fourth and fifth, both you and the rear of the car are still traveling at about thirty-five miles per hour. Your head collides with the instrument panel.

"At six-tenths of a second, the car's frame bends. The instrument panel has crushed your skull by this time. Your feet crunch their way through the floor. The force of the sudden stop yanks your shoes right off your feet."

The driver paused. "That's about

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it," he finished. "Then doors pop open, and hinges tear away. The front seat rips loose and crushes your body from behind. But you don't have to worry about that. Because by that time, you're dead."

"You—you've seen this happen?" asked McCullough.

The driver nodded. "Slow-motion pictures of wax dummies on the test track. Of course, in doing the amount of racing I have, I've seen the results of some bad accidents. It isn't pretty, McCullough."

McCullough forced a thin laugh through dry lips. "You know, you had me going there for a while," he said. "But you're not going to crash this car unless you have to, Algood. What happens if I outwait you? You've got to run out of gas sometime."

"I'm way ahead of you. I'm a racing driver, remember? These machines are my meat and potatoes. Why do you think I didn't allow you to put on the safety harness?"

"What are you getting at?"

"There's a certain speed—not very fast, really—where I can hit something solid, and this harness I'm wearing will keep me safe. Oh, it'll bruise my chest, but I'll be held in the car. You, on the other hand, will be shot forward. There are a lot of interesting possibilities. Maybe you'll just be knocked unconscious against the dashboard. On the other hand, you could stick your head through the windshield and either fracture your skull or slit your throat on the glass. In any case, I'll be safe, and you . . . Please don't touch the safety belt."

The car swerved alarmingly, and McCullough slid his hands onto the top of the dashboard.

"Now the gun, McCullough. Throw it away."

McCullough gripped the pistol tightly. "I oughtta . . ." He pointed the weapon at the driver. Neither man spoke, and the only sounds were those of the tires on pavement and the air rushing by the car. The driver could sense McCullough's mind weighing the alternatives. Capture meant an easily-proved accusation of murder and the rest of his life spent in a small cell; years wasted because of an old woman's screams. There was a click as McCullough took up the slack in the trigger, and the driver's sweaty hands tightened on the steering wheel.

Yet to shoot was to risk the awful carnage of a crash at nearly a hundred miles an hour, the shriek of jagged, twisted metal cutting through flesh and bone, the mangling of living bodies as the wreckage compressed them into a bloody, formless mash.

With an oath, McCullough rolled down the car window. A strong

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wind stung the driver's face as McCullough threw away the gun. A shower of sparks appeared in the rear-view mirror as it hit the surface of the road. The driver slowed the car to a lawful sixty-five miles per hour.

At an underpass just beyond Kingston, he located a police car, its door open and its red dome-light revolving. He wheeled in beside the gray automobile, placing his own car close enough so that it was impossible for McCullough to open his door and make a run for it.

"Lucky Algood, a racing driver!" spat McCullough as the trooper snapped handcuffs onto his wrists. "Out of all the cars that travel the Thruway, I had to get you. You don't even look like a racing driver should. Too small and skinny."

"It doesn't take strength, McCullough. Just quick reflexes."

"If you weren't a professional driver and didn't know all that stuff about crashing cars and such, I'd have been home free," growled McCullough. "The cops never would have found me—or you either."

None too gently, the trooper yanked McCullough to the gray car and placed him inside. Then the trooper returned to where the driver was standing.

"I heard McCullough mention Lucky Algood," the trooper said. "I've seen him a few times on TV, and there's one thing I'm sure of, mister. You aren't him."

"No," was the soft answer. "My name's Entwhistle—Ernest Entwhistle. I run a small bookstore in Philadelphia. I was on my way to visit my daughter and her family in Buffalo. As a matter of fact, I was bringing a gift to my grandson, a book. I found it fascinating reading. But perhaps Mr. McCullough would be interested in it. I can always get another copy somewhere."

From his pocket, the driver drew a slim, paper-backed volume. The trooper took it, glancing at the title: *Safety on Wheels* by Charles W. "Lucky" Algood.

From the front cover, a photograph of a handsome young man in the act of donning racing goggles looked back at him.

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Undeniably, concern for one's fellowman is, at times, tempered by untoward disregard for tradition.

HOBART is a scroungy little mining town in the Rockies that hibernates in winter and lives off its past history and the tourist trade in the summer. It has seen its share of long, shiny cars, but never quite anybody like D. J. Armitage.

D. J. and his car went together. Prosperity was reflected in their clean, polished look, but they were both as serviceable as you could ask in a tough situation. They turned up in Hobart as regularly as the spring thaw, D. J. a year older each time, the big car always new. As the years wore on, D. J.'s hair turned from iron-gray to a silver that rivaled the glittering chrome on his car.

The last year that Hobart saw D. J. was different. Other times, he'd drive to the Buckskin Hotel, meet old Jake Miller out of the hills, celebrate their anniversary, and by evening he and his car would be on their way—but this year Jake wasn't there.

For forty-some years Jake had always been there—it was a ritual—but this year Jake wasn't there.

D. J. waited. Being the gentle-

by Nancy Schachterle

man he was, he waited patiently, and with restraint. As the afternoon got longer, he'd glance at his watch more often but, generally speaking, he waited very well. Jake didn't show up.

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D. J. spent that night in Hobart, he first time since the flood of '37 had trapped him above the bridge. He waited all the next day, too.

On the third day, D. J. went to the sheriff.

"He's dead," he told the sheriff. "That poor old man's died all by himself up there in the hills, and nobody around to care. You've got to go bring him out, Sheriff."

Well, the sheriff didn't agree with him. "Like I told you, Mr. Armitage," he said, "old Jake was down last month, just like regular, for his supplies. Ain't no reason to suppose he's dead. That's a long ways in there, and I can't spare a man to go that far on a wild-goose chase."

D. J. was very reasonable. He didn't get mad, or rant and rave, or anything. He was very reasonable; but firm.

"I tell you, Sheriff," he said, "if Jake were alive nothing would prevent him from being here on March 19th. I've waited two days, in case he lost track of the date, which I can assure you he has never done in forty years. I believe you know all about our anniversary. Forty-one years ago the 19th, Jake and I discovered the Midas Mine that put this town on the map. Every year since then we've met at the Buckskin Hotel on March 19th, and split a bottle of champagne in celebration. Even though the Midas petered out years ago, Jake never left it, so he hasn't had far to come; and no matter where Armitage Enterprises has taken me, every year I've returned. We've been faithful, Sheriff. I tell you, if Jake were alive, he'd be here."

"Never missed a year?"

"Never. Now, you can understand, in the last few years it's been a bit of a drag on me, especially when business has taken me far afield. This year I was in the Philippines, but I made it back in time. It meant something to Jake, our anniversary. He always stayed in the hills, just an old-timer who never got out to see the world, and the old fellow got a kick out of our yearly celebration. Champagne. Always champagne. It gave him just a touch of the world of elegance, a touch the old fellow cherished. And now he's dead." D. J. brushed decorously at the moisture that gathered at the corner of his eye. "And I demand—yes, demand—that you send someone to bring the poor old man's body down for a decent burial, Sheriff."

The sheriff stood firm. As far as he was concerned, there was no body. At least, he wouldn't presume that until Jake didn't turn up for provisions next month. D. J. even began to lose his cool, but nothing he could say would move the sheriff

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off his stand. He'd wait and see.

Well, the upshot of it was, D. J. went himself.

"I really can't afford the time, you know, Sheriff," he protested. "I have to be in Chicago on the 24th. But I'm certainly not going to let that poor old man's body lie up there unconsecrated any longer."

The sheriff did cooperate to some extent. He and D. J. were pretty much of a size, so he lent D. J. some jeans, a woolen shirt, and an insulated jacket; and since D. J.'s car obviously couldn't make it up the mountain trails that were all that were left of the road into the old Midas, the sheriff even lent D. J. a Jeep. Granted, it was a vintage model, still wearing its Army green, but the sheriff promised D. J. it would get him there and back.

So D. J. started out. The first few miles weren't so bad, but once he got past Bushwhacker's Gulch things were different. The first rough spot, the trail just disappeared into Pinon Creek; not crossing the creek, mind you, but going up it. D. J. put the Jeep in four-wheel, and got out and locked in the hubs. He could see that the creek bed was solid rock, so he just drove right in, hanging onto the wheel for dear life, and stuck with it until the track took off up the hillside again about a quarter of a mile upstream. It ran in the open for about three hundred yards, and then went into a sizable aspen grove; not big trees, but thick, real close together. D. J. stopped once to watch a cow elk he'd scared out hightail it up the mountainside, but the rest of the time he kept moving; slow and easy, but forging ahead all the time. There'd been a lot of rain that spring, and he got into some touchy places, slick black mud, real treacherous, where he'd sideslip into the trees, especially when the trail banked sharp, which it did a lot of the time. D. J. had always been a tough one, though, and he'd never let himself go soft, so he made it through. He held onto the wheel of that old Jeep, bucking and kicking, and he got through, somehow.

The old Midas was in a high mountain valley, as pretty as you please, setting up there in a big, deep bowl with snow-covered peaks on all sides: Mt. Khufu, that looked like an Egyptian pyramid transplanted; Ranger, broad-shouldered and dignified, maybe not as high as some, but looking mighty special; and the Three Bears, mama, papa and baby. D. J. hadn't been up here since the old days, and they looked so familiar he got all choked up. It was too early for the wild flowers, but to D. J.'s eyes the valley was like it had been when he'd last seen it, bright with Indian

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paintbrush, alpine daisies, and penstemon.

He stopped for a good long look. Up to the north he could see the squatty sod-roofed log cabin in which old Jake had lived out his last years. D. J. started the engine again and moved ahead on his sad mission.

As he pulled up to the cabin, a figure came around the corner. Tall and rangy, wearing tattered denims and a disreputable hat, and carrying a long-handled shovel, the man stood watching him, tanned face all asquint against the sun that came from behind D. J.

"Jake!"

"D. J.? Is that you? What you doin' up here?"

D. J. climbed down from the Jeep, moving stiffly after his long, rough ride. "Jake! I thought you were dead! When you didn't show up at the Buckskin on the 19th, I thought you were dead. Came to bring you out." It's understandable if D. J. sounded a bit flustered.

Jake moved up and spat reflectively into the turf.

"Well, I'll tell you, D. J.," he said. "I just got to thinkin'. Near forty years we've gone on, meetin' every 19th of March down there at the Buckskin. This year seemed like I was gettin' just the least bit tired of it. Champagne. Every year champagne; never did much like it, sour sort of stuff. Now, if it'd been a good drink of whiskey, might have been a different thing. But that's quite a trip to town for me—reckon you found that out, all right—and this year I just figured I'd skip it. Just didn't care much anymore. Know what I mean?" He cocked his grizzled old head at D. J., shoving the hat at an angle to scratch behind one ear.

For a minute D. J. didn't say a thing. He might not want to admit it, but he was a bit winded by the trip, and he wasn't as used to that altitude as he might be. Then he heaved a long, hard sigh.

"I came up to take your body back, Jake," he said quietly, and he grabbed the shovel Jake was holding. "And by damn, I'm going to take your body back." He connected with one magnificent swing.

It took him a while to struggle old Jake into the back of the Jeep, but he finally made it. Then he stood back, panting a mite, and brushed off his hands.

"You know, Jake," D. J. remarked, "I never could stand to have somebody make a liar out of me."

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The art of a painter is not necessarily limited to his brushwork.

IT WAS RIGHT THERE in the window, behind the dusty glass, next to scatters of tarnished metal jewelry, drooping peacock feathers, rusty faucets, collapsed hats and much-traveled suitcases: an enormous oil painting of Conway.

Conway, lean and smiling, wearing that broad-striped native poncho he'd always worn down there in Mexico, a small #1 brush cocked over his right ear and a wineskin clutched in his knobby right hand. Conway, smiling his gap-toothed smile, his big moustache bristling, and behind him the flat bright Mexican countryside; the view from the back room of the girl's house. Conway, a self-portrait he must have painted while they were down there all those months.

Right there in the front window of the News From Nowhere Junk Emporium, Conway smiled out on McAllister Street and all its run-down buildings and junk shops.

Andrew Paulin had forgotten to keep breathing. He coughed now and gasped in air through his open mouth. He was a tall blond man of thirty, about twenty pounds overweight and wearing a new gray suit. He'd been eating a chocolate almond bar and he threw it down toward the gutter. "Conway," he said aloud.

A heavy black woman in a green coat smiled at him as she passed.

Paulin licked his lips. He'd been in the News From Nowhere shop before. He liked to browse in the antique shops and junk stores that

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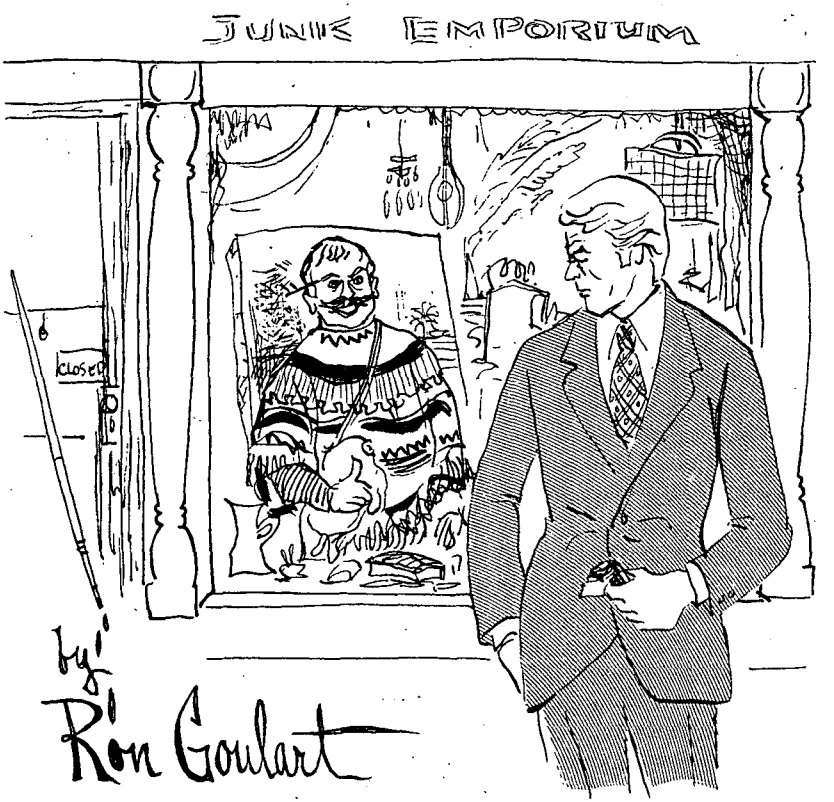
dotted San Francisco. Now that he only had to pretend to be working as a commercial artist he could take all the time he wanted to wander Union Street and Clement and McAllister. During the nine months he'd been back in San Francisco he'd been down here on McAllister as often as two or three times a week.

He went over to the door of the shop and grabbed the brass knob. The knob spun around and around in his hand and nothing happened. Paulin pressed his shoulder against the grimy door and shoved. "Don't tell me he's closed?"

There were a dozen signs pasted on the inside of the glass door. *Hi*



Class Junque. Choice Items Come From Everywhere To Nowhere. In case of emergency contact owner at Oakleaf Hotel, Eddy Street.

After trying the door once more,

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Paulin shaded his eyes and tried to see inside the long, narrow junk shop. He couldn't tell if there were any more of Conway's paintings inside or not. He turned away.

He went back around the corner and climbed into his sports car. "I should have gone back to that studio of his and gathered up all his stuff," he said to himself. He left the curb and headed for Eddy Street. "No, Conway had a couple of other places where he bummed studio space. There's really no way of telling where all he left his paintings. Now look, all that is back there is a picture of Conway in that fussy realistic style of his. New neorealism, didn't he call it? That's all it is. A self-portrait of Conway, so what. Nothing in it to link him with you. You might as well buy the thing and keep it out of sight, but you have to relax. Okay, it does show the girl's house, but nobody knows that besides you and Conway and the girl. And they're both dead."

The hotel clerk at the Oakleaf had grown fat since he'd been tattooed, and the snakes and flowers on his chubby bare arms were dim and distorted. "Who?" he asked Paulin.

"The old guy who runs the News From Nowhere."

"What's that?"

"A junk shop over on McAllister. You know the one."

"Oh, you mean Mac."

"Mac. Old guy who always wears a brown hat and rimless glasses."

"He's eighty-two, can hardly see anymore," said the fat sixty-year-old clerk. "Why you want him?"

"I want to buy something out of his shop."

"What?"

"A painting."

"Say, is this Tuesday?"

"Yes, it is."

"Tuesday Mac closes up shop and goes over across the Bay to visit his in-laws."

"You don't know where I might reach him?"

"Nope."

"What time do you expect him back?"

"Not till after ten tonight."

"Well, I'll call then."

"Switchboard closes sharp at ten. You'll have to wait until tomorrow," said the tattooed clerk. "That must be some terrific painting."

Paulin backed off from the brown wood counter in the Oakleaf's small lobby. "Nothing special, really."

Driving home toward his Russian Hill apartment, Paulin said to himself, "Don't go acting too anxious about the damn picture, now. I think you're right to want to buy it and get it out of the way. But don't make everybody wonder why.

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There's nothing to link you with Conway or the girl. Everyone—the papers, her family—accepted the crash. They believe she had an accident and was burned up in her car. Burned up along with the money she was carrying. You and Conway fixed that up. Just relax."

At the signal at the bottom of his street he glanced over and saw a Chinese man in a station wagon watching him. He must have been talking out loud, moving his lips. He had that habit and he'd have to watch it, control it. He made himself grin over at the Chinese and shrug. The light changed and he shot uphill toward home.

The shop door opened this time. Paulin stepped inside the News From Nowhere junk store, squinting. The long low room was dim, dusty. He stepped over a fallen tuba with a feather boa in its bell. "That's an interesting painting in the window," he said.

Behind a glass counter sat an old man in a brown coat-sweater. He had a soft brown hat pulled down low on his bald head. Sprawled on the streaked counter top were a dozen roller skates, a hacksaw, two cast-iron skillets, a Mason jar full of green marbles, three volumes of a 19th-century encyclopedia and two slices of whole wheat toast on a cracked china plate. "Far as I can tell," replied old Mac. He touched his glasses, leaving dusty prints on the thick lenses. "My sight is slowly diminishing."

"I think I might like to buy the painting. How much?"

"Far as I can see, it's the work of an authentic artist." Mac picked up the top slice of toast and broke it slowly in half. "Twenty dollars."

Pretending not to be that interested, Paulin said, "That's a little steep."

"Fellow yesterday offered me fifty."

"Why didn't he take it, then?"

"He might come back today and do just that. Twenty-five dollars. You want it?"

"I thought you said twenty."

"The more we have to argue the higher the price climbs."

"Well, okay. I'll buy it."

"No checks. Twenty-five in cash."

Paulin got out his wallet. "Have any more around by that particular artist?"

"Signed his name on it, didn't he? I forget what he calls himself."

"I didn't really notice," said Paulin, drawing out two tens and a five. "You wouldn't have anything else?"

The old man nodded. "One more. Out in back. Cost you thirty-five dollars, that one will. Want to take a look? Go on through the little

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door over there, push it hard."

"Guess I might as well," said Paulin. "He's an interesting artist, whoever he is."

"Likely he'll be famous someday and you'll make a fortune from your chicken-feed investment."

Paulin made his way around several small stuffed animals and to the door leading to the back room. He pushed and the door swung lopsidedly open.

This room had a higher ceiling and was chill and damp. Great dark bureaus and chairs hulked around the room, piles of ancient magazines, clouded mirrors, more jars of marbles.

Here was another painting by Conway. Paulin inhaled, involuntarily bringing one hand up against his chest. This one showed the girl. "She was never very good-looking," Paulin said to himself. "The good-looking ones never seem to have money. Ugh, that awful peasant blouse she always wore, showing off all her blotchy skin."

He stepped closer to the big Conway painting, which was propped in a worn cane-bottom rocker. "When did he paint this thing? Maybe before I met him down there. He was trying to convince her she should be a patron of the arts even before I joined him. I suppose you should feel sorry for her, wanting everyone around her doing beautiful things." Finally he grabbed up the unframed painting. "But I don't really feel anything. I can live here in San Francisco for two or three years on that $50,000 we got out of her; longer if I take it easy. That's all I feel about her."

In the shop again, Paulin said, "A nice bit of work. I may as well take both of them. Thirty-five did you say?"

Mac rubbed at his glasses and leaned toward the painting. "I forgot it was a picture of a pretty girl. That should be worth fifty bucks at least."

"She's not all that pretty."

"Arguing merely ups the prices around here."

"Okay, all right. Here's the rest of the money."

After he took the cash, Mac bent and reached under the counter. A stuffed quail fell off a shelf and bounced on his stooped back. "Someplace I have some nice wrapping paper I can give you."

"I imagine you get items in from all over."

"From the four corners." Mac unfurled a spotted sheet of brown paper. "See if that'll fit around both of them while I dig you up a length of string."

"For instance, I wonder where these two paintings came from." Paulin watched the old man shuffling off into a corner.

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"Mexico." Mac knocked a model train off a sprung sofa and clutched up a ball of twine.

"Really. Who brought them in?"

"Didn't get their names."

"Two people?"

"Man and wife, as I remember, brought them in over the weekend," said Mac, cutting off a piece of twine. "At least I presume they were man and wife. These days, and around Frisco, you never can tell. Couple in their early forties, did some touristing down in Mexico. Picked up these paintings, then decided they didn't want them after all. No accounting for taste. Here." He flung the string to Paulin.

Paulin had the two Conway paintings wrapped in the rough paper. He took the twine and tied up the package.

"You do that pretty well. Maybe you're an artist yourself."

"Yes, I am," replied Paulin. "You wouldn't know the name of the couple, would you? Where they might live?"

"This isn't a pawnshop," said Mac. "I have no need for biographical information."

It was a calm spring day, and Paulin had walked all the way from his apartment. Leaving the News From Nowhere shop, he put the wrapped Conway paintings under one arm and began walking back toward Russian Hill.

"That was just like Conway," he said to himself as he walked the bright mid-morning streets. "Painting her exactly as she looked, not flattering her at all. He had great confidence in himself, no need for flattery. Charming, smiling. Well, it didn't do him much good. He's dead at the bottom of that canyon for almost a year now. Apparently he hasn't been found yet. I didn't figure he would be. With the girl it was different. We wanted them to find her and believe the $50,000 was with her; $50,000 she told her parents she was going to use for good works among the Mexican poor; $50,000 Conway and I convinced her would finance the three of us in a wonderful remote art colony for long happy years. What an unattractive girl."

High above, gulls circled in the clear blue sky.

"Smiling Conway," Paulin said to himself. "I still don't like the way he treated her at the end, teasing her. Not just knocking her out quickly and dumping her in the car. No, he wanted her to know he was going to kill her, that he'd betrayed her. A fine sense of humor, Conway's. Well, in a way that made it easier to do it to him. Using a variation on the original plan and dumping him unconscious in that wreck of a car of his and sending him to the bottom of the canyon

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way out there in nowhere. Yes, and I got rid of him in time to save nearly all the $50,000 for myself."

He was breathing in a more relaxed way and he stopped at a hot dog stand on Van Ness and bought a chili burger. He ate it as he walked, smiling now to himself.

He saw the third painting eight days later. This was the worst of all. "It's me," Paulin said, stopping on the rainy street in front of the News From Nowhere Junk Emporium. In this Conway painting, Paulin was sitting out in the red-tile patio behind the girl's house down there in Mexico. The girl was there, too, standing in an archway behind Paulin. Conway must have done that one from memory, because Paulin never posed for it. Conway was good at that. He could look at you once and remember everything about you. Paulin had seen Conway do a painting of his parents years after they'd died, and it was perfect.

Mac was taking some sort of oily gears out of a cardboard box, wheezing as he did. "You're in luck." He wiped his hands on his brown pants and touched his hat. "I got another of those pictures in, by the artist you like so much."

Paulin waited for the old man to mention it was a portrait of him, but Mac's eyesight must have prevented him from realizing it. "Yes, I noticed as I was passing."

"Sixty bucks for this one. I figure this particular artist is so much in demand, at least by you, I may as well cash in on it."

Paulin looked from the stooped old man to the painting in the shop window. It made him very uneasy having the picture there, showing him with the girl like that. "I'll take it. Did you happen to buy this from the same couple?"

Mac fished a wrinkled slip of yellow paper out of the sweatband of his brown hat and then clamped the hat back on his bald head. "Turns out these people got a dozen more by the same artist."

"A dozen?"

"Don't know if they want to sell them," said the old man. "See, when I showed interest they got the notion this particular artist was maybe hotter in the art world than they'd imagined. Many people suspect junk men are secret millionaires because of all the shrewd deals they pull. I'm going to have to go over there in my spare time and dicker. If it's worth it."

"I could go," offered Paulin.

"You'd cheat me out of my markup that way." Mac unfolded the scrap of paper. "Though maybe you could figure my commission in advance and then go and deal direct with these people."

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"How much would you want?"

"I'd settle for one hundred."

Paulin sighed, got out his wallet. "Okay, all right. Who are they?"

"Name is Henderson and they just moved into a new place out near Stinson Beach. You know where that is, over in Marin County."

"Yes. Give me the address and phone number. I'll call them."

"Haven't got a phone as yet," said Mac as he handed over the slip on which he'd written Henderson and the Marin beach address. "Moving in, and you know how long it takes to get a phone installed. They tell me they're at home most every night."

Paulin took the address, crumpling it in his fist.

The fog kept coming in. The Henderson house sat alone, ringed by pine trees, at the end of a short road that climbed up from the beach. The low shingle house was dark, and Paulin parked his sports car away from it, off the road under some oaks.

The mist rolled in across the ocean and came swirling up over the cliffside behind the house, spinning through the trees.

"Now, if they aren't home," said Paulin to himself, "what difference does it make? If I can get the paintings without their seeing me, so much the better. It's likely all they have left will be here." He climbed quietly out of the car. "They must have bought this stuff from someone who cleaned out Conway's studio. Or maybe somebody who stored some of his paintings for him. When Conway didn't come back for a while, whoever had the stuff got tired of holding it and unloaded. Anyway, I'll have to see what these Hendersons have got."

The grass was high in the front lawn and, near a low rail fence, some sort of sign had fallen over. Paulin went directly to the front door and knocked. "Just in case someone is at home."

There was no response. After a moment Paulin slid a flashlight out of the pocket of his dark jacket and went quietly around the house. He found an unlocked window and raised it, then climbed in.

This was a bedroom. No paintings here.

He found them, seven pictures in all, lined up against one wall of the livingroom.

"Damn Conway," said Paulin. "I hadn't realized he'd documented our stay down there so well."

The three of them figured in most of the paintings: the girl, Conway and his smile, and Paulin. Even the girl's car, the one they'd put her in. There it was, sitting in the field near her house, with the three of

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them standing around, all looking happy. "Not expecting to die," he said.

Paulin checked out the other rooms in the Henderson house, but there were no more paintings.

He returned to the livingroom and studied the seven pictures again, swinging the beam of the flashlight from one to the other. "It's odd, in a way, so many of Conway's paintings should show up now," he said to himself. "You know, suppose this is some kind of setup? Oh, how could it be? Conway's dead, at the bottom of that canyon, far away in Mexico." Paulin went closer to the paintings. "You don't know for sure, do you? All you did was knock him out and put him in his car and roll it over. You don't actually know he's dead. Of course he's dead. How could he have gotten out of there?"

Paulin picked up the painting of the three of them standing by the girl's car. "Conway's car never caught fire, you know. You should have climbed down there and made absolutely sure he was dead. But he was dead. If he wasn't, where has he been all these months? Suppose he did get out alive somehow. He'd know I was coming back here to San Francisco. You know how patient he was with the girl and how he loved to toy with her. Suppose the paintings are new? Maybe he's been watching me for months, figuring out how I live, the pattern of it. He could have made fresh paintings and bribed that nearly blind old man to put them on display. Now he's got you over here and he's going to torture you, like he did the girl, and find out where you've got the rest of the cash hidden."

Paulin put the painting back against the wall. "Stop scaring yourself. Conway's dead and it's only a coincidence these old paintings have turned up now. Gather them up and get out of here."

Something made a faint noise elsewhere in the house.

Paulin looked down at his free hand, shining the flashlight on it. He rubbed his forefinger slowly over his thumb, feeling what was there. Then he said, "Oh, God."

It was wet paint.

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It would be interesting, indeed, to know how many good investments have been initiated by the fine hand of coincidence.

OPERATIVE 375

by Gary Brandner

WHEN THE CREATURE walked in the office door, Gus Blattner stopped cranking the printer and stared. The apparition wore a trench coat and a thrift-shop fedora pulled low over a pair of orange eyebrows. The eyes and mouth were concealed behind purple shades and an unlikely black moustache.

"Aren't you supposed to say trick or treat?" said Gus.

With a flourish the trench-coated

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figure whipped off the hat, glasses, and moustache to reveal a grinning young man with orange hair to match the eyebrows. He stepped to the counter and announced, "I'm Dudley McBean."

"So?"

"This *is* the Universal Academy of Investigation, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Gus admitted.

"Well, I'm Dudley McBean," the young man repeated. "Operative 375."

Gus wiped his hands across his ink-smudged sweat shirt. "I think you better talk to my partner," he said and retreated to the rear of the office and into a plywood-partitioned cubicle. Inside, a round-faced man sat at a card table with a pile of envelopes in front of him. He was slitting these open with a nail file and removing cash and checks, which he stacked in tidy piles.

Gus said, "Secret Agent X-9 or somebody like that is out front. I've got a terrible feeling it's one of our students."

What does he want here?" asked the man at the desk.

"How would I know? I'm just the muscle in this operation. All I do is crank the stupid machine."

"Don't sulk, partner," the other man said. "You know how important it is that we keep turning out the lesson booklets. I would gladly spell out at the machine, were it not for my old lacrosse injury. Shoulder stiffens right up."

"I'd just like to get out of here once in a while, even if it's only to go to the post office."

"Now, Gus, the only reason I pick up the mail is because I have to be out anyway making the necessary personal contacts. That is, after all, my specialty. Besides, what difference does it make how we split up the work? The money goes fifty-fifty, and take a look at what came in just today. You never did this good sticking up gas stations."

"Ah, don't mind me," Gus said. "I'm on edge from worrying about Natalie. I think she's playing games with some other guy. If I could just catch her at it, then I could kill both of them and get it off my mind."

The other man stood up and walked around the table to clap his partner on the shoulder. "That's the curse of being married to a beautiful woman," he sympathized. "While I go out and talk to our visitor, you sit down and count some money. Maybe that will help cheer you up."

Adjusting his butterfly bow tie, the round-faced man left the cubicle and strode to the counter where Dudley McBean waited, smiling hopefully.

"Good afternoon, my friend. I'm

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Colonel Homer Fritch. What can I do for you?"

"Pleased to meet you, sir. I'm Dudley McBean." The young man waited for a reaction, got none, and went on. "Operative 375. From Snohomish. I took your course in how to be a private detective."

"Of course!" Colonel Fritch exclaimed. "From Snohomish. One of our very best students. What brings you to Los Angeles, Dudley? You *do* know that our classes are strictly home study?"

"Oh, yes, sir. But now that I've completed the course, I wanted to come down in person to pick up my solid bronze investigator badge and handsome embossed diploma. I brought the extra ten dollars for handling, like it said in your ad in *Fearless Action* magazine."

The colonel searched the guileless blue eyes for a trace of mockery. Finding none, he said, "I think I can fix you up, young man." He reached under the counter and brought up a badge in the shape of a shield with an eagle perched aggressively on top. It bore the words *Official Private Investigator.* Colonel Fritch laid it reverently in front of Dudley. "Wear it with pride," he said. Reaching down again, he produced a printed sheet of stiff paper. "There wasn't time to have your name embossed on it, but if I may borrow your pen I'll take care of that. I have been told I write a very fine hand."

Dudley passed over a ballpoint pen, and the colonel carefully stroked the young man's name in the blank space on the diploma. He added a touch of rococo scrollwork and slid it across the counter.

"There you are, my boy, and godspeed back to Snoqualamie."

"It's Snohomish, Colonel Fritch, and I'm not going back."

"You're not?"

"No, sir. I figure there are probably more opportunities in the detective business here in Los Angeles than there would be back home."

"I daresay. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"So I'd like to get the free job-placement assistance like it said in your ad."

"Hmm, yes, right you are. Sharp-eyed lad. Very promising. I'll take care of that right now."

The colonel tore a sheet out of a spiral notebook and wrote rapidly:

This will introduce Mr. Dudley McBean. He has my personal recommendation for a position as Private Investigator.

Col. Homer Fritch

"There you are, my boy," he said. "Just take this note to any of the larger detective agencies in town and they'll have you out on a case before you can say Continental Op."

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"I don't know how to thank you, Colonel."

"Tut-tut, lad. Good luck to you and good-bye."

With the new badge pinned discreetly inside his lapel, Operative 375 cinched up the belt of his trench coat and replaced the hat, shades, and moustache. "Lesson Eight—The Art of Disguise," he explained, and slipped furtively out of the office.

Colonel Fritch sighed heavily and headed back to the plywood cubicle. Gus Blattner came out to meet him.

"Didn't you lay it on a little thick?" Gus said.

"It doesn't do any harm," the colonel said, "and it made the boy feel good."

"How will he feel when he finds out that your name at the legitimate detective agencies carries about as much weight as Daffy Duck?"

The colonel shrugged. "I am afraid the young man will be disillusioned, but he will have learned one more valuable lesson—Be wary of strangers."

"That won't help much when the cops come for us."

"There is nothing to fear from the police. We have made good, to the letter, on all offers put forth in our advertisement. Try to remember, Gus, that we are honest businessmen, so stop your worrying."

"Sure, if you say so," Gus muttered, and resumed cranking the machine.

The next afternoon the colonel and Gus were stuffing handsome embossed diplomas into mailing envelopes when Dudley McBean entered their office again—undisguised this time.

"Hello, there," the colonel said coolly. "I didn't expect to see you back here."

"I think I need more assistance," Dudley said. "I took my diploma and your personal note to every detective agency in the Yellow Pages. Some of them laughed at me, and the others weren't that polite."

"I'm sorry to hear that, my boy, but I've done all I can for you."

"So I decided to go into the business on my own," Dudley continued, as though there had been no interruption.

"I see. Well, best of luck." The colonel returned to stuffing diplomas.

"I thought you might want to put up the money to get me started."

The jaws of Gus Blattner and Colonel Fritch dropped in unison, and they stared at the orange-haired young man. When the colonel found his voice he said, "What gave you that preposterous idea?"

"It would be a good investment for you," Dudley said. "I've learned

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a lot about detective work. For instance, how do you think I found your office? All the ad gave was a post office box number."

Colonel Fritch started to answer, then his eyes grew suddenly thoughtful and he turned to his partner. "Gus," he said, "how about running down to the stationer's for some more of these envelopes?"

"What for? We got two boxes in the back."

"It wouldn't hurt to have two more."

"Oh, all right," Gus grumbled, and walked around the end of the counter and out the door.

When he was alone with Dudley the colonel asked, "Tell me, my boy, how *did* you find our office?"

"Lesson Three," Dudley said proudly, "Shadowing and Surveillance. I waited at the post office until somebody—it turned out to be you—came to pick up the mail from the box. Then I trailed you, just for practice."

"Very enterprising."

"But you didn't come straight here from the post office. You stopped at an apartment on Franklin Avenue where you visited a blonde lady for one hour and twenty-two minutes."

The colonel dabbed at his forehead with a crisp white handkerchief. "Dudley," he said, "I have reconsidered and decided to finance you after all. If you will step back into my private office, we will discuss the terms."

"I sure appreciate that, Colonel Fritch," the young man said. "Some coincidence, isn't it, how that blonde lady has the same last name as your partner."

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When the walls begin to close in, one must beware lest the nightmare dictate a contrary sense of direction.

FOUR EYES

by Max Van Derveer

THE JANGLE of the telephone startled me. I jerked my eyes from *Rand McNally* and frowned on the intruder. It couldn't be business, not at 9:35 on a rain-slashed night. I hadn't sold or renewed a policy in nine horrendous months, and the few policies that remained were paid-up Life. So none of my people had smashed up a car, burned a home or been robbed. None of my people wanted his insurance man. That left . . . what? Cops?

Fear is an intangible, triggered spontaneously. Fear is an involuntary paralyzation of the mind.

I stared at the demanding telephone. I was afraid. The cheaply paneled walls of the home garage I

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had converted into an office were swiftly closing in on me. Once there had been an agency office downtown, a business that was off and running. Success, comfort, stature were ahead—and walls in the agency office did not move. No more. Today there was the garage-office with its ancient roller safe I'd picked up at a hotel auction, its mismatched file desk, chair and typewriter I'd found in the used marts. Today, instead of blossoming secretaries fresh from the pool, there was the occasional use of a high-school girl typist who lived down the street. Today I didn't know the meaning of the words "insurance business." Today the walls moved in.

The phone continued to ring.

"*Leave me alone,*" I wanted to shout. "*I was forced . . .*"

But how many cops telephone before making an arrest?

I collected myself, attempted to ignore the ringing demand, attempted to concentrate on *Rand McNally*. Somewhere in its pages there was a tiny niche in the United States where Billy and I could become lost. Originally, I had intended to die, but now I'd made up my mind to live. My wife of sixteen years, her body hollowed by cancer, cobalt and knife, was buried. Gone. I had to forget her. No, not forget. I had to change my perspective. I had to remember her from the fun days. Time heals. Ask any expert, amateur or professional. Razz. Nothing heals. The gap remains raw and ragged and razor-edged with loss. The pain remains very real. But a son bridges. The son is only in his twelfth year. He has a long way to go, and he needs guidance and help.

Dear God, make the phone quit ringing . . .

Billy dashed into the garage-office with a whoop. He always seemed to whoop. It was good. It told me he was healthy in mind and body, had recovered from the shock of death and funeral with child-quickness.

"Hey, aren'tcha going to answer the phone?" He wore pajama bottoms, nothing more, and he had a freshly-scrubbed look, his damp reddish hair catching gleams in the lamp light.

"Did you clean out the tub?" I countered.

"Sure," he nodded. "Why don'tcha answer—" He reached out swiftly, swooped up the receiver. "Hello?"

Curious Billy; always curious. Looking, examining, asking, maybe he was to become a scientist, a researcher.

"It's for you, Dad," he said, handing me the receiver. "Some man."

"Davey?" asked the caller.

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A chill rippled through me. "Just a minute, Amos."

Billy stood propped against the ancient safe, his fingers dancing idly across the dusty keys of the old typewriter on the stand—curious again, head cocked slightly, blue eyes alight.

"Son, will you get me a glass of milk from the refrigerator?"

"Me, too? And two of Sara's cookies?"

I nodded and he scampered from the office. I turned to the mouthpiece. "Amos, I told you I'm finished. No more," I said quickly.

"Easy, Davey. Let me lay it out for you. It's a cracker this time. Big."

"No, Amos . . ."

"But you gotta hear, man. You won't believe. I'll be at the Dreamland Motel tomorrow afternoon, say three o'clock."

"I'm finished, Amos."

"When we're talkin' about two hundred thou? A *guaranteed* two hundred thou? And that's your slice. Mine's the other two."

He chuckled when I went silent. Then: "That's more like it, Davey. See you tomorrow."

Amos Hill and I grew up together in Old Town. Amos Hill and little Davey Chapman might have been brothers; you saw one and you saw the other. But they weren't brothers, merely attracted to and comfortable with each other. Then had come age and the thrust into the progression of wars. Amos Hill had gone off to the Marine Corps, and Davey Chapman had gone off to the Navy. It had been the first parting of views on survival: the Corps would keep a first-class drill sergeant in the United States to train others, said Amos; riding out a war on the deck of a vessel that might never get into a combat zone seemed a safer course, reasoned Davey. Views shattered. Amos Hill saw months on line across from an Oriental enemy. Davey Chapman made so many beach landings he came to believe no other life existed. Yet both survived intact to return to Old Town. Second parting: Amos Hill now was a slick, a conniver, an easy-buck artist, a bank robber with a flair for the accumulation of a string of young wives and stolen money, all of which he maneuvered from behind a false front, a novelty business. Davey Chapman returned a somber young man bent on a university education, one wife, children, a man geared to accept rationally the hard work, frustrations, setbacks, and slowly accumulated security. The mortgaged bungalow in surburbia, the yearling business in Downtown—out of Old Town—automobile payments, furniture payments, charge accounts, credit cards all were Davey Chap-

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man, rookie insurance agent—until the cancer, cobalt and knife, a shattering and expensive tricorn, fell like a black shroud around him. Somewhere there had to be a ray of light, hope, defense. There was: Amos Hill and his banks.

"Basically, Davey," said Amos Hill with a wry grin, "I'm a legitimate businessman. There's a helluva profit in novelties. People these days are nuts about novelties. So I only hit a bank now and then. Maybe three or four a year. And never around here. Mostly out west. The small towns. I hit a cracker last time out. It was in Colorado. Got almost forty thou. Maybe you read about it."

Davey Chapman did not remember reading about a bank robbery in Colorado.

"A man needs bread, Davey, he goes to a bank," said Amos Hill, his grin widening. "So I go to the banks. You want in, pal, you're in. We always were a good team back in the kid days on the street. But no loans, Davey, no giveaways."

"I-I . . . have to have money, Amos."

"So there's a neat little setup out in Arizona. Saw it during a trip last winter. Dream up a business trip, Davey, something to take you out of town. Say, next Tuesday. We'll fly out, but not together. I'll meet you in the terminal out there. We take rooms in separate motels, give me a day or two for reconnoitering. Then we hit and split. We do the splitting right there, fly back individually, never get together here unless I set it up. That way we're just a couple of kids who grew up together in Old Town but never see one another anymore. Have you got a gun?"

"N-no."

"No sweat. I'll get you one, give it to you in Arizona."

"Amos . . . I'm not sure . . . I can do it."

"These things are peaches and cream, Davey, and nobody gets hurt. The guns are a threat, no more. I'm glad to have you aboard, pal. I've wanted someone for a long time, four eyes better than two, that sorta thing."

Four eyes, two guns, five bank robberies and a share of the take had paid for cancer, death, burial, grief, allowed a business and future to be ignored, and left almost a hundred thousand dollars, in cash, scattered in four savings and loan safe-deposit boxes. (Never put your money in banks, banks were too easy to knock over.) The cash was now to permit new lives in a new corner of the world. In time, an insurance man might even open a new agency; a small agency, of course, nothing conspicuous, but something to account for income,

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something to explain logically a mortgage on another home, hiring a housekeeper, and educating a son. A small agency, new life in a new environment, might even allow a man to gloss over what he was: a criminal.

One hundred thousand dollars was enough. On the other hand, how much glossing would three hundred thousand allow?

I attempted to shake off the thought. I already was terribly frightened, expecting the pounce of cops any day, living on nerve ends, because of Amos Hill and his ways.

Billy brought the two glasses of milk and the cookies Sara, our three-day-a-week housekeeper, had provided. "Why are you looking at the maps?" he wanted to know.

I wanted to tell him, but I could not. It still was too soon. He had one more month of the school year ahead and already I had vowed not to clutter his mind during that month with thoughts of a new home in a new corner.

"Are you going on another trip?" he asked.

It stabbed, but I managed to work up a grin as I shook my head. "No, son, the trips are finished."

"You mean you aren't ever going away again?"

"Oh, maybe I'll take a flyer to Paris someday," I said, and regretted the reflexive words the instant they were out of my mouth.

Billy's young face fell. "You always said that to Mom."

"Yes, son," I nodded, ruffling the damp hair. "It was a little joke between us." I drew him to me, kept an arm around his waist, attempted to summon banter. "It's bedtime for you, pal, but before you go, tell me something. If you could live anywhere in the United States, where would that place be? California? Texas? Florida? Minnesota?"

"I'd live right here. All of my friends are here."

The Dreamland was a clean, modern motel with a modest-price look. Amos Hill wore an expensive look, an expensive air, drove an expensive sports car, but his grin and handshake were genuine. It had been almost four months since I'd seen him.

"I wasn't sure you'd come," he said.

"I'm not sure why I'm here," I said truthfully.

"Two hundred thou, your cut, that's why, Davey. It's too much to ignore."

"Look, Amos, Margaret is dead."

"I know, pal. I read the obituary columns too."

"And I still have money put away."

"Good for you. I don't. Not a dime. I live differently. I *need* this

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one. You can't let me down now."

"I'm going away, Amos. Somewhere I can live without worrying about police every time the phone rings or there's a knock on the door."

"The bulls aren't onto us, pal."

"But we tempt fate every time we go out."

"A plane can crash every time it takes off, too. Listen to this setup, then decide, okay? It isn't even a bank. There's a guy named Joe Babinski, Joe Babe. I read about him in one of these true-crime magazines. Hell, he was in the Navy once, like you, a Navy frogman. Anyway, the point is, that this Joe Babe . . ."

Joe Babe was in a federal prison and would not even be eligible for parole for another fifteen years. Babe and two nonentities named Fletcher Wain and Buzz Cassiday had put together the heist of an armored car downstate, in an ocean city named Lakespur. Using hand grenades, they had lifted approximately $400,000 in cash. Buzz Cassiday had been shot dead during the escape. Fletcher Wain later had been found dead in a ditch with two bullet holes in the back of his skull. Joe Babe's work, everybody figured, but nobody could prove it. Anyway, the cops had picked up Babe but had failed to come up with the $400,000.

"I'm not a treasure hunter," I told Amos.

He grinned. "The searching has ended, Davey. I've been looking for two months, and all I've done is waste time. That bread could be rotting in the ground somewhere, probably is. We're going after Joe Babe now. I'm borrowing from the boys in South America, the chappies who pick off an ambassador and use him in exchange for political prisoners. Only our *ambassador* is going to be a ten-year-old kid named Mark Pfitz. His papa is Howard Pfitz, the senator who is making all of the loud national noises these days. Rings a bell? Pfitz lives right here in the city. We pick up his kid, then demand an exchange for Joe Babe. You think anybody is gonna quibble? They'll give us a hood for the life of a ten-year-old son of a U.S. senator. And once we get Babe . . . well, I'll guarantee Joe Babe will tell us where the money is. He's gonna figure it's a small price for his freedom—and his skin."

I felt as if I suddenly were sitting in a refrigerated room, and my silence alerted Amos Hill. "What's the matter, pal?"

"I have a son," I told him stonily.

"Aw, look, the kid isn't gonna get hurt. He gets a ride down to Lakespur, that's all. The action is there, Davey. That's where Joe Babe and

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his friends hit the armored car. Joe didn't even get out of town, but he did stash the green so it figures the money is still there someplace. All we gotta do is get Joe back in Lakespur, then we cut the kid loose, call his papa, tell him where to pick up the boy—while we work on Joe."

"It's a lousy idea, Amos."

"Would you rather it be Billy, Davey?"

He suddenly had gone hard, and I sat in shock.

"It could be Billy instead of the Pfitz kid," he said sharply. "I can pick up your kid sometime, pal; going to school, coming home from school. You can't lock him in a room and keep him there forever. Sure, you can take him and bolt. Go ahead. I'll tag you, that's for sure. And time isn't important. Remember I've got at least fifteen years. That's how long Joe is sacked. So I'll get your kid sometime, someplace, Davey. And when I do, who are you gonna holler to? The cops? Are you gonna swarm all over the cops and tell them your old pal Amos Hill has heisted your kid? When you do, Davey, you also are gonna hafta tell them *how you know* Amos Hill took your kid, tell them about a few banks here and there maybe, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico. Davey, I'm putting the pressure on you because I need you. I gotta have at least four eyes on this deal, and I can trust you, right? Anyway, there's two hundred thou in it for you."

"Don't . . . do this to me, Amos," I pleaded.

"We go Saturday. The Pfitz kid plays Little League baseball every Saturday afternoon. He'll walk home from the ball field."

Amos was living in a plush steel-and-glass high-rise. When I arrived at his apartment that Saturday noon, the door was opened by a dark-haired beauty, a young girl with quick black eyes and coltish appeal. Amos introduced his fourth—or maybe it was his fifth—wife with a one-sided grin. Her name was Consuelo. At one o'clock she went out to steal a car to be used in the kidnapping of the boy, Mark Pfitz. Amos and I watched three innings of a televised baseball game before we went downstairs and got into his sports car. When we arrived at the supermarket parking lot, it was crowded. We left the sports car and I was surprised to find a popular-make sedan already braked in the drive behind us, motor idling. Consuelo was at the wheel. We got into the car and rolled smoothly away from the market.

"Relax," said Amos without looking at me. "This is strawberries and

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sugar all the way, Davey. So relax."

Consuelo let us out of the car two blocks away and around a tree-laden corner from the Little League ball field. We sauntered back to the corner and around it, casual in open-necked shirts, jackets, slacks and loafers, hands stuffed deep in pockets as we ambled slowly, just two stereotype suburbanites lazying away a Saturday afternoon in walk and idle conversation. Far down the street, a boy in a blue baseball cap and with a glove on his left hand walked toward us.

"So the stars are with us," grinned Amos. "See the kid? Mark Pfitz. I told you this was strawberries and—"

"Look behind him," I snapped, my hand going reflexively to the small gun in my trouser pocket. "The green sedan at the curb. It's moving."

"Okay, okay," breathed Amos, suddenly taut. "So he's a senator's son. So he's got a watchdog. I'll take care of him."

"Here comes your wife."

"No sweat, Davey. She's around the fuzz already. You get the boy while I put the heat on the federal man."

Consuelo swerved the car into the curb beside the boy. Amos ducked into the side of the car and yanked a gun from a shoulder holster. I reached out and grabbed the boy. He yelped. Then the green sedan down the street rocked suddenly and I saw the driver's door begin to swing open. Amos fired four shots. I saw a man go down into the street as I stuffed the boy into our car. Amos piled in behind me and Consuelo jet-propelled us, peeling rubber all the way to a corner and around it.

Mark Pfitz had cool. He gave up struggling the instant I slapped the adhesive tape across his eyes. He slouched in a corner of the back seat, half on and half off the seat. He lay quiet, breathing hard, but he no longer attempted to lash out with his fists or feet, and in the supermarket parking lot he was pliable. He allowed himself to be whisked from the sedan into the rear seat of the sports car. Amos was at the wheel. Consuelo leaped into the bucket seat beside him and we rolled out of the parking lot and downstate to Lakespur where Amos already had made a suite reservation at a busy motel.

The first direct-dial long-distance telephone call to the Senator Howard Pfitz residence was made from a downtown Lakespur pay-booth at seven-thirty that Saturday night. Amos was brief and blunt. He allowed two hours for wheels to turn and a decision to be made. At nine-thirty he called from a suburban pay-phone and this time he was

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asked for instructions—after being informed that Joe Babe could not be made available for delivery before 4 p.m. on Sunday. Amos said, "Nine o'clock Sunday evening will be fine. Leave him in the main Continental bus terminal. The boy will be released at eleven o'clock—if we have not been molested. He will be given the police-station number

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here." Amos hung up abruptly.

I felt ill as we drove back to the motel. "I don't like the waiting."

"The federal prison is fifteen hundred miles from here," said Amos.

"I've got a bad feeling about all of this."

"It's running slick, pal. Ease up."

But things were not running slick when we arrived at the motel.

Consuelo sat on the edge of one of the double beds, disheveled in appearance. There was a bright, but vague, light in her black eyes. She was intoxicated, and she announced, "He tried to escape, Amos. The silly little damn fool of a boy tried to run—and I killed him, I think."

He was sprawled in the bathroom, face down, spread-eagled and inert. The back of his head had been flattened, blood had formed a large pool around his shoulders, and there was shattered glass from what had been a bourbon bottle, glistening in the blood.

We took the boy's body fifty miles north of the city and deposited it in a swamp. "We should have brought her, too," snarled Amos.

I was numb, but what could I do? Run? If I ran, Billy might end up in a swamp too . . .

We sat in the bus terminal at nine o'clock Sunday night and watched Joe Babe being freed. He seemed to be accompanied by two medium-statured men. The pair walked him to a car-rental desk and then drifted off in opposite directions. Joe Babe stood looking around, shuffling and nervous. It was as if he had just been born an adult. Finally he moved, slowly and cautiously in the beginning, but as he closed the space between himself and the street door his pace quickened. Amos moved in from the right, I took Babe from the left. As we closed the wedge, we each turned on Amos' signal and rolled a tear-gas canister back into the terminal. Screams and shouts and oaths erupted immediately, but now we were on Joe Babe's back. We hustled him outside and across the sidewalk and into the sports car. Amos rolled another canister across the walk, and then we were away from the curb and Consuelo was wheeling fast as Amos took a tear-gas gun from the floor of the car and began to fire pellets into the street.

Amos had staked out the abandoned NASA tracking station south of the city weeks before. All we had to do was take down a loose chain across a pitted highway leading into the station, replace the chain and then drive behind the Quonset-type building. The car was out of

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sight. No worry on that score.

We hustled Joe Babe up to what had been an observatory room. From the glass bubble, we had a clear view of the entire area around us. I stood a numbed watch while Amos went to work on Babe, and Consuelo disappeared into an adjoining room. Consuelo professed not to like administered violence.

The trussed Joe Babe broke with the third application of the pliers. Amos grunted. He was stone-faced and sweating. "Come here, Davey. Keep an eye on this dude but don't kill him. He could be lying to us. I wanna see all of this bread before we cut him loose."

Babe stared up at me hard as Amos went into the other room with Consuelo. Joe was hurt but somehow he did not look frightened. I was the one who was shaking as I stood there with my hand on the gun in my pocket.

The sound of the shot reverberated through the building and brought an involuntary yelp from me. Joe struggled frantically against the bonds. Now he was frightened. Amos came from the other room, gun in hand. His face was set. "She had to die, Davey. I wasn't going to live with her forever, and some day she could have unloaded to the fuzz."

It was almost too much for me to comprehend. The shock kept sending alternating hot and cold waves through my body and my mind and feet seemed rooted. Amos wiggled the gun. "Come on, Davey, we've got to bury her. Can't leave her here for someone to find."

We left Joe trussed in the chair and carried the body outside, where Amos surprised me again. He had a shovel in the trunk of the sports car. He found a soft stretch of soil along the building and began to dig furiously. I stood aside. I felt in a trance. None of this was happening. Yet it was, and somewhere deep inside me a lust for survival was coming alive, pushing at the fog that shrouded my brain. A new shovel carried in the trunk of a sports car seemed incongruous. Perhaps the shovel even was a tip-off. Perhaps Amos Hill had planned all along to leave no survivors. A man, even a man of Amos Hill's tastes and expenses, could live high and handsome for a while on $400,000.

Instinct propelled me. I fumbled for the gun in my pocket but found I could not withdraw it. "A-Amos," I faltered, "let me spell you."

The grave was long enough now and he was down about three feet. He spiked the shovel in the mound of loose dirt and came up out of the hole. "Thought you'd never volunteer, pal," he said. He faced the wind, attempted to light a cigarette. I brought the shovel down

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with all of my strength against his skull. I didn't want to have to strike a second time. I wasn't sure I could.

I took car keys from Amos' pocket, rolled him into the shallow grave and dropped the girl on top of him. The fact that I could kill staggered me, but I had to be rid of Amos Hill. Otherwise he would hound me until I was dead. I shoveled dirt frantically. It was as if the dirt would blot out this nightmare, but all I got was a quick mound, a fresh reminder. I ran inside the building and upstairs. Joe Babe was on his side on the concrete floor, still bound to the chair. He watched for Amos, then after a long while he mumbled, "Oh, geez, geez . . ."

I took the gun from my pocket and freed him. He lay without moving, remained curled. "P-pal," he quavered, "I'm tellin' yuh, the bread is underwater. I'm gonna hafta get it for you."

I jammed the car keys into his palm and he piloted the sports car to the pier on the deserted ocean beach. "I gotta go in the water," he said at the pier. "I mean, the money is in a bag sunk out there a ways. Tied to a piling, yuh know?"

I wiggled the gun in my hand.

"I ain't gonna try to break, friend. That's a big ocean out there. I can't swim it."

I motioned for him to move.

"Don't shoot me. You're sorta . . . well, jumpy with that gun, but don't shoot me, okay? The green is yours. All I wanna do is live."

He walked slowly into the water under the pier but kept looking back over his shoulder. I watched him wade out until he was chest deep. Then he stopped and clung to a piling for a moment as he looked back again. Suddenly he disappeared under the water and my heart leaped. He was down a long time but he finally broke the surface again. As he moved slowly back toward the sand, he seemed to be carrying a tremendous weight. I wondered how much $400,000 cash weighed when propelled underwater.

Babe was waist-deep in water now. He stopped, leaned against a piling, seemed to be gasping for air.

"Come on!" I managed.

"Just . . . a minute," he wheezed. "Let me catch my breath."

I saw him reach high on the piling but I was not aware that something might be going haywire until I saw his arm go back. The arm shot forward, and in that instant I had a flash of remembrance. Joe Babe, Fletcher Wain and a man named Buzz had hit the armored car with grenades. Was it possible that Babe, in stashing the money, also had stashed the leftover grenades on a

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piling in case of future trouble?

The grenade plopped on the sand in front of me and I fired the gun reflexively. I heard Joe Babe scream as I threw myself away from the grenade. Now I was to know the death I once had wanted—but the grenade was a dud, or perhaps water-deadened.

Gingerly, I eased around it and went into the water under the pier. I stumbled over Joe Babe. He was dead. I searched the lapping water with both hands, found the bag. It was a canvas duffel bag and heavy. I struggled with it up to the sports car. Two hours later at Amos Hill's apartment building, I transferred the bag in the silent early-morning hour from the sports car to my aged sedan and drove recklessly home to my suburban bungalow. For some insane reason, it now seemed imperative that I get off the streets, out of sight. I needed seclusion, someplace I could collect myself, and a sense of direction.

There was lamp light in the front room of the bungalow when I braked in the carport in front of my garage-office. I stared at the light for a moment and then remembered that Sara always left a light on when she was staying with Billy.

I took the duffel bag into the office from the carport, opened it. Someone had wrapped the cash in small waterproof bundles and had weighted each bundle with a chunk of lead. I spun the dial of the safe—and Sara said sleepily from the doorway: "Mr. Chapman?"

I approached her with my nerve ends screaming. "Just got in from the trip, Sara. Is Billy all right?"

"Fine, Mr. Chapman," but the words seemed to explode from her.

I asked, "What is it, Sara?"

"Down the street," she said. "The Collison girl, the little girl who sometimes types for you, she's disappeared. The police have been here, and they wanted to know—"

"Police!"

"They wanted to talk to you, Mr. Chapman. They think the girl has run away from home, maybe gone off with a boy. They thought maybe you might have heard the girl say something . . ."

Sara let the words trail off with the bong of the door chimes.

The man who entered the house at Sara's opening was square-shouldered and almost apologetic. He identified himself as a police detective. "Mr. Chapman, I'm sorry to disturb you at this hour but—"

"It's all right," I interrupted swiftly. "Sara was just telling me."

"Yes, well . . ." He hesitated, looked around almost as if expecting to find something.

Then it hit me. He had been watching my bungalow. He had watched me drive in, and now he

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was standing in my front room, not quite sure of what to expect but prepared to pounce.

"Sergeant," I said coldly, "I have been out of the city on a business trip—not with Kay Collison."

"We're trying to get a line on the girl, Mr. Chapman," he said calmly. "From everyone who knows her. Opinions can help."

"At four o'clock in the morning?"

His cheeks colored slightly. "A boyfriend has disappeared too," he said. "We expect to find them together."

"Dad!"

Billy charged across the room and clung to me. I ruffled his head. "The doorbell woke me," he said.

"It's okay, son," I said, holding him close.

"What did you bring me this time? Something special, I hope."

"I'm sorry, Billy. Nothing."

"Nothing?"

He did not seem to believe it. He broke from me and dashed into the garage-office.

"Sergeant," I said, "Kay Collison did some typing for me once every three to five weeks maybe. I don't really *know* the girl. I don't—"

"Dad!"

This time the whoop came from the office. Billy shot into the livingroom again, carrying a package of money. His eyes were round. "Where didja get all of the money?" he bleated. "Hey, we're rich! Sara, we're rich!"

Curious Billy—the someday scientist, the someday researcher . . .

All I could do was stare at the police sergeant. I felt as if now I had my one-time wish. I was dead.

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I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

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It has been said that all the beautiful sentiments in the world weigh less than a single lovely action.

NELL SAT DOWN heavily in the lumpy club chair, let the dust rag she was using drop to the floor, and looked disconsolately around the worn, drab livingroom.

This isn't the way it was supposed to be, she thought dejectedly.

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Things weren't supposed to turn out this way at all.

Her forehead wrinkled and her eyes seemed to move closer together as she frowned deeply. Whatever happened, she wondered, to that house in the suburbs where she was going to plant flowers in the back yard and have mid-morning coffee with her neighbors and go to afternoon club meetings? Whatever happened to all those wonderful plans, those dreams?

Harry let her down, that's what happened. Nell squinted knowingly. Harry let her down, all the way down.

She rose, leaving the dust rag where it lay, and walked languidly into the kitchen. The little apartment seemed colder than usual; Nell shivered, purposely, and drew on an old sweater of Harry's that she had taken to wearing around the house. She turned on the burner under the percolator and stood there waiting for the coffee to heat. On impulse, she turned the oven to high and opened its door.

Yeah, she thought knowingly, Harry had let her down, all right—him and his big talk and his promises. She glared at the scuffed linoleum under her feet. Some house in the suburbs! A shabby little apartment so close to the mattress mill where Harry worked that in the summertime the ticking lint sifted under the windows and collected like snow on the inside sill. All she had accomplished by marrying Harry was exchanging one grubby neighborhood for another.

The coffee perked once and before it could repeat itself Nell picked up the pot and carried it to the table. The cup she had used at breakfast was still there and she filled it with fresh coffee without bothering to rinse what was left of the old. She put the pot back on the stove and carried her coffee down a short, narrow hall to the bedroom.

It felt colder in the bedroom than in the rest of the apartment; Nell pulled the old sweater more tightly around her and bent to open the radiator valve all the way. She found that it was already fully open, although the pipes were barely warm to her touch. She swore softly—at Harry, even though the lack of heat was not directly his fault. Putting her cup on the table, she pulled a portable electric heater from under the bed and plugged it into a wall outlet. It be-

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gan to heat at once, its fan creating a dull whirring noise in the otherwise quiet, cold room.

Nell stood by the heater for a moment, letting it warm her feet. Looking out the window, she saw that it had begun snowing again; large, wet flakes were falling heavily in the still winter air of the building's courtyard. The flakes themselves were cloudy-white as they rained down, but when they touched the dirt and concrete of the courtyard, they dissolved into a lusterless gray slush.

Nell grunted disgustedly, pulled down the shade and climbed into bed. Sitting up, she drew the blanket, which as usual was mostly on Harry's side, over her legs and around her waist. She reached for the cup beside her and sipped at the coffee. Over the rim of the cup as she drank, she saw Harry's calendar on the table on his side of the bed. The last thing at night before he turned off the light, Harry crossed off the day that had just passed. The calendar was now down to its last page, and had twenty days crossed off.

December twenty-first. Nell's mouth drew into a thin, hateful line. It was the *sixteenth* December twenty-first that she had endured with Harry and, she resolved grimly, it was going to be the last.

Nell put the cup down, opened the table drawer, lifted a tissue box and took an envelope from under it. From the envelope she removed an insurance policy and unfolded it lovingly. She turned directly to her favorite clause.

"Double indemnity," she said to herself in a near whisper. She repeated it, as if it were some sacred phrase. "Double indemnity . . ."

Pursing her lips, Nell took another sip of coffee. Her pale eyelids narrowed. *Double the face amount,* she thought. She turned back to the first page of the policy and, for perhaps the fiftieth time in the past year, fixed her eyes greedily on a line which read: *Amount of Policy—$10,000.*

Double the amount, she thought again. Twenty thousand dollars. Twenty *thousand* dollars.

Nell leaned back against the headboard and reached for her coffee. What all would that much money buy? she wondered, sipping. How many new dresses, bracelets, necklaces . . .

Not that she intended spending it for such things, mind you; not much of it, anyway. She was going to invest most of it, put it into something solid like Lettie Tillich did when she got all that money after the city garbage truck scooped up her Bernie and dropped him into the grinder. Lettie had used her head, she had; half the money went

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into the bank savings and the other half had been the down payment for a swell little duplex in Leftwich Heights. One of the apartments she kept for herself, and the other she rented out to a butcher and his wife—no kids, no pets. With the rent she got from the second apartment, she was able to meet the mortgage and pay the quarterly property tax, and on top of it the butcher brought her home choice cuts at wholesale.

No, with Lettie Tillich as an example, there was no doubt in Nell's mind how the money would be used—wisely and cautiously. There was no sense in daydreaming about things like clothes and jewelry. Security, that's what was really important to her.

Nell finished her coffee and got out of bed. December twenty-first, she noted, glancing at the calendar again; Christmas Eve was only three days away. If she intended doing it then, she was going to have to make up her mind once and for all which method she was going to use. As she walked back to the kitchen, cup and saucer in hand, the final choices on which she had decided manifested in her mind. Poison or pushing . . .

She put the dishes in the sink and turned to look out the back window. The porch, for as far in as the wind drifted, had a clean, white floor of fresh snow. So did the stairs, as far down as the second floor and as far up as the fourth, one floor above her. She knew from experience that the other porches and their stairs and landings would be the same; and if it snowed all day, as it probably would, and the temperature dropped below freezing again tonight, as it surely would, by tomorrow morning those stairs and landings and porches would be treacherously slippery.

Normally during the colder months, and *always* during December and January, the tenants in the building—in fact, in all the buildings of the block—avoided using the back stairs. They knew from experience—the vicarious experience of Gunter or Gunther or whatever that German superintendent's name was who had slipped on old lady Cordoni's landing and broken his spine—that to venture onto icy back porches after a fresh snow was little short of lunacy. Even for those who, to get their garbage to the basement, had to go through the house, down the front stairs, around the court, and through the outside gangway, it was still better than risking a body cast after a false step on some top stair, and it seemed that no one ever slipped on a bottom stair.

Of course, little Mullen, who delivered the milk, never slipped.

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Mullen wore baseball shoes with spikes on the soles that dug into ice like an old miser's death grip and balanced him as steady as the Flatiron Building. A wire basket hanging from the crook of one arm, nose and cheeks as red in the summertime as they were in the freezing winter, little Mullen, all four-feet-eleven of him, would mount each building's back stairs with a *crunch-crack-crunch* that had become as familiar as the bells of St. Francis de Sales three blocks over.

Some of the tenants, several years back, had complained about the rear porch delivery, saying that Mullen's *crunch-crack-crunch* was too loud too early, and further, that retrieving the milk from outside their back doors was, at times, somewhat precarious. It was suggested to the milk company manager that Mullen change to front door delivery. Mullen did—for one week. At the end of that time he submitted an overtime statement for one hour and forty minutes, at time-and-a-half, because he could not—as he could in the back—cross from one building to the next via the porches.

Mullen rested his case. Two-and-a-half hours of straight time per week, for fifty weeks per year, came to a hundred and twenty-five hours per year or three-point-one-two-five weeks' salary and no additional revenue from the route.

Back door delivery resumed. *Crunch-crack-crunch*, and it was take it or leave it, because that was the only milk company that served their part of town.

Now, every morning, just at five, little Mullen would defy the ice with his baseball spikes and put one pint of cream somewhere in the proximity of Nell's and Harry's back door, which was the third floor up; and every morning, less than an hour later, Harry would open that door and carefully step and stretch and reach until he had the bottle of cream—that precious cream that he hogged all to himself, half in his morning coffee, half in his lunch Thermos—had it in his hand and was gingerly making his reentry.

Thinking about her husband's morning ritual, Nell unconsciously reached to a corner next to the kitchen door and curled her fingers around the handle of a ragged gray mop. She lifted it, gripped it with her other hand, held it as a soldier would hold his rifle at port arms, then suddenly she lunged and drove the mop head against the back door—drove it grimly, and with a strength and force surprising for her scrawny, veiny arms.

So simple, she thought. *So easy. One quick shove and over the banister Harry would go, headfirst, to*

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the concrete thirty-five feet below.

It would be good-bye Harry, for it most surely would kill him, a fall like that, and nobody in the world would ever suspect foul play—particularly not on Christmas morning.

Nell expelled a deep breath and put the mop back where it belonged. That was one way, but she had another besides.

She reached up and opened one door of a faded, peeling cabinet that she had been trying to get Harry to paint for six years. Inside, on the lower shelf, the very first and most convenient thing there was Harry's bicarbonate. Nell removed it from the shelf; an ordinary twelve-ounce bottle with a white label. She opened it and looked at its half-full contents of finely ground white powder. Enough left for about another week; Harry used it at the rate of two bottles a month. He had a teaspoonful in lukewarm water every morning before he left for work, and he had another mixed the same way about an hour after supper. Then, invariably, sometime between two and four in the morning, he would be up again for a third dose. It happened so often it had almost become a ritual.

"I heard your Harry get up in the middle of the night again," Mrs. Snide, whose bedroom was just under theirs, would say to Nell two or three times a week. "The poor man, it must be nerve-wracking not to be able to get a good night's sleep."

Nerve-wracking, indeed! Nell thought. For her maybe, with her sleep disturbed so often; but not for him. Oh, no, not that one! More often than not he didn't even open his eyes from the bedroom to the kitchen, and he got back to sleep quick enough once he was under the covers again, while she was left to roll and turn with insomnia. Poor man, ha! She did all the suffering while he got all the sympathy!

She smiled a bloodless, cold smile. Well, soon enough the tables might be turned. Soon enough it would be her getting the sympathy—when she was a widow! And Harry, well, he wouldn't have to worry about any more upset stomachs. Nell had a permanent cure for that . . .

She opened the opposite door of the cupboard and took down a second bottle. Almost identical in size and shape to the bicarbonate bottle, it even had the same kind of stopper in its top. Inside, when you removed that stopper, as Nell did now, was a fine-grained white powder just like the bicarbonate powder, only this particular powder was more apt to cause an upset stomach than cure it.

Nell turned the bottle around and studied the label. Of course, it

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did no good to read the contents, words as long as your Aunt Tillie's petticoat; sometimes Nell was convinced that half of them were made up, not real words at all. It was worse than trying to follow the Mass in Latin.

But there were other words, words that Nell *could* understand, and these were the ones in which she was interested now; words like *Danger*; like *Poison*; like *Contents May be Deadly if Swallowed.*

How much, she wondered, would it take to do a first-rate, proper job of it? Half a bottle? She pursed her pale lips and nodded. That should do it. Half a bottle in a big bowl of thick Mulligan stew, so thick, particularly with onions, that Harry wouldn't even be able to taste it, and with a whole package of those *Sleep-Quik* drugstore tablets ground up in it for good measure—why, Harry'd probably just go to sleep and never wake up again.

After he was, well, asleep or whatever, Nell would have to sit in the bedroom with him, being very certain not to fall asleep, until about quarter of three in the morning. Then she would move around heavily on his side of the bed, shuffle around a bit to be certain Mrs. Snide heard it downstairs, and go down the hall to the kitchen. She would run the water in the sink, wait for a minute or two, and go back to the bedroom. She wasn't quite sure what she'd do after that; certainly she wasn't about to spend the rest of the night in bed with a—a . . .

Well anyway, she dismissed the thought, the worst of it would be over. When daylight came—Christmas morning it would be—she would get up and go on about her holiday cooking. Mrs. Snide would be up later to wish her a Merry Christmas and comment on poor Harry not being able to get a decent night's rest even on Christmas Eve. Yes, Nell would say, but at least he could make up for it by sleeping late; he had been dead to the world (that was a good one) when she, Nell, had got up, so she'd just let him sleep. But now, my, it was getting on into the day, wasn't it? She wondered if he could be sick? Would Mrs. Snide mind coming into the bedroom with her just to have a look?

Ah, it would work beautifully, Nell decided. Either way. But again the choice plagued her. Pushing or poison . . .

A sudden knock at the front door shocked her guiltily out of her evil thoughts. She whirled toward the hall, eyes wide. Standing in silence, she stared toward the front of the apartment. The knock sounded again, louder, more determined, or was it only her imagination?

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She wet her dry lips and quickly put Harry's bicarbonate and the poison back in their respective places. Wiping her hands nervously on the old sweater of Harry's that she had on, Nell hurried into the hall toward the front door.

She opened the door with the safety chain on and peered into the bare, drafty outside hall. There were two children standing there looking up at her. The boy could not have been more than twelve; the girl was probably two years younger. Their faces were pale when they should have been red from the cold.

"What d'you want?" Nell snapped.

"Got any old papers, lady?" the boy asked. "Or rags?"

Nell parted her lips for a curt, negative reply; then she checked herself. She *did* have a small stack of papers, right in the corner of the kitchen next to the door, where she kept the ragged gray mop.

She removed the chain. "Come inside," she said shortly. "Wipe your feet first."

They entered, the boy first, followed by the girl. Nell noticed that both were wearing worn, threadbare coats that were too big for them. The boy, despite the snow, had on sneakers; the girl's mittens were ragged enough to show cold, chapped knuckles.

"Come along," Nell said. She led them into the kitchen. "Stand there by the stove if you like. I'll get the papers."

The two children hovered next to the warm oven with its open door. Both removed their mittens and warmed their hands. After a moment, the girl put her palms gently over her ears and smiled tentatively at the boy.

Nell gathered the papers from the far corner and brought them to the table. She studied the two children for a moment.

"Brother and sister, are you?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said the boy.

Nell grunted. "Did y'ask for rags too?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I might have some in the closet in the other room. While I look, d'you want some cocoa?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" said the girl, speaking for the first time. Her eyes sparkled at the thought.

"Sit down at the table then," she said brusquely. "You'll be in my way there at the stove."

Nell put a pan of water on a burner and emptied a package of dehydrated milk and a package of cocoa into it. She stirred it until it was heated, then took it off the stove and and got out two cups and two saucers. She poured the cocoa and gave it to them at the table.

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"Mind you don't spill it and make a mess for me to clean up," she warned. "I'll go look out the rags."

In the bedroom closet, Nell pulled a large grocery bag from the shelf and dumped its contents onto the bed. There was an assortment of things she had stopped wearing or using—an old dress, some worn towels, a sheet that could no longer be mended, other things—that for some reason she had not thrown away. She gave them a cursory examination now to make sure there was nothing among them that she wanted to keep. When she was satisfied on that score, she put everything back in the bag and took it into the kitchen.

This is all I have," she said, putting the bag on top of the papers. She saw that the boy and his sister had finished their cocoa. The girl was holding her cup in both hands, examining it. The boy was looking at her curiously.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Why d'you look at me that way?"

"Ma'am, are you rich?" the boy asked.

Nell started. "Rich! For the love of heaven, no! What in the world ever gave you an idea like that?"

The boy looked over at his sister. She carefully put the cup back in its saucer and smiled self-consciously at Nell.

"Your cups match your saucers," she said quietly.

Nell stared at them as they bundled up again and gathered their salvage, the boy carrying the heavier load of papers, his sister taking the bag. She let them out the front door and then returned to the kitchen. She looked at the places where the children had sat.

Ordinary dime store cups and saucers, she thought. *But they match.*

For some reason the little apartment did not seem so cold and shabby anymore, and when she thought of Harry again, it was with a warm feeling that she had not known for a long time. He wasn't such a bad sort, really. He *tried,* she'd say that for him. Worked long hours at a hard job; he did try. But he just couldn't make it.

Nell sighed and resumed making her Christmas plans.

Poison or pushing . . .

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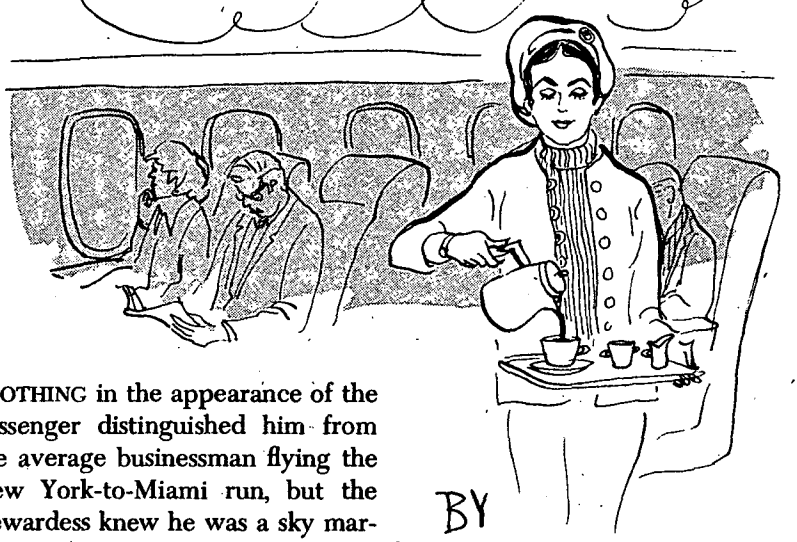
A little extra service can certainly change the "course."

Up Above the World So High



BY FRED S. TOBEY

NOTHING in the appearance of the passenger distinguished him from the average businessman flying the New York-to-Miami run, but the stewardess knew he was a sky marshal, assigned to the flight to prevent hijackings. Her pretty blonde head bent close to his as she leaned across him to pick up a napkin.

"Six-A," she said, in a voice so low that only he could hear. "Pink shirt, sitting by himself. I think there's a gun in the seat-back pocket in front of him. Hijacker?"

She straightened up and went on to the next row. "Coffee?" she said brightly. The passenger nodded and the stewardess poured a refill from the steaming container on her tray.

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The sky marshal rose casually and went forward toward the men's room. He passed Row 6 without a glance, but as he came abreast of Row 3 he took advantage of a slight lurching of the airplane to bump against a passenger sitting in the aisle seat on his right. This man, flamboyantly dressed in a bright, figured sport shirt, open at the neck, might have been taken for a wealthy playboy, but he, too, was a sky marshal.

Marshal No. 1 leaned down as if to apologize for bumping him. "Six-A. Plan Two," he said, under his breath. He straightened up, and continued forward, stopping at the water cooler to fill a paper cup.

Marshal No. 2 got up and headed toward the rear of the plane. Plan Two was for lightly-loaded flights, when the seat in back of the suspect is empty.

Marshal No. 1 finished his cup of water, took a few paces back, and slipped into the vacant seat beside the hijacker.

"Don't see how they make any money on these flights," he said, conversationally. "I'll bet this plane is more than half empty."

The hijacker, a florid man of middle age who ran to loose fat around his middle, glanced at him irritably and grunted.

Marshall No. 1 suddenly leaned to the left, putting his left arm across the hijacker's body to block any sudden movement of the latter's arms, while with his right hand he reached into the seat-back pocket and drew from it a shiny black pistol. He weighed it in his palm.

"Plastic!" he said, disgustedly. "Well, they sure make 'em look real these days. Right where you could grab it in a hurry, wasn't it? Maybe you read about the plastic gun that lad used last week. That where you got the idea?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" the hijacker said. "Get your arm off me!"

With the hand holding the pistol, Marshal No. 1 flipped back his coat lapel, showing a badge. "Just convince me this is something you are taking home to the kiddies, and you'll be OK," he said, "but you'll have to submit to a search."

"I never saw that thing before in my life!" shouted the hijacker. "If you think you're going to search me, buster, you're a nut! I'll slap a suit on this airline so big it will go out of business!"

The hijacker started up, pushing against the restraining arm; but firmly down on his shoulders from behind him came the hands of Marshal No. 2.

"I was chosen for my even temper," said Marshal No. 1, "but I warn you, my friend's specialty is

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dirty fighting. Better stay quiet. With three hijackings on this line in a month, no judge or jury is going to be sympathetic about a lawsuit. If you don't want us to search you, let's just wait till we get to Miami and the state police will take care of it."

High in the bright blue above the fluffy clouds, the airliner careened southward at an improbable six hundred miles an hour.

That evening the pretty blonde stewardess shared a motel room in Miami with a pretty brunette stewardess from the same flight.

"He certainly was nasty when they took him off," the brunette said. "I thought they were going to have to clobber him. It *was* suspicious that he denied putting that phony gun in the seat-pocket, wasn't it? Who else would have put it there?"

The blonde was making a new face in front of the mirror, and as she was stretching her gorgeous mouth to its limit as she applied lipstick, her reply came through indistinctly. It sounded to her companion like, "Me."

"What did you say?" she asked.

The blonde turned from the mirror and her mouth relaxed into a smug smile. "I said 'me.' *I* put the gun in the seat-pocket, when I was serving his dinner. He was so hung up on the way I was pushing my leg against his fat knee that he didn't notice. I got it in a toy store in New York."

"But, Gloria, *why*? You could go to jail for something like that, couldn't you? I didn't realize you even knew the guy!"

"Never saw him before in my life. But nobody's ever going to know unless you tell them. You're my pal, aren't you?"

"Of *course*, hon! But if you didn't know him, for heaven's sakes why did you do it?"

"Well, you know that book about the stewardesses: *Coffee, Tea or Me?*"

"Sure. I saw a couple of passengers reading it on the flight today."

"Well, a few days ago I said to myself: The next time I say 'Coffee, sir?' to some leering fat lech, and he flashes the cover of that book and says, 'How about *you*, Baby?' . . ."

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Hopefully, the view will be taken that it was a great fight while it lasted.

Flagg Poe and The Ten Million Dollar HIJACK

THE HIJACKER was hiding in the sleeper compartment.

Flagg didn't notice anything wrong when he left the Big Pine Cafe on U.S. Highway 99 and walked across the broad sweep of the parking lot to the cab-over diesel semi. It was just past dawn, and the chill mountain air needled through his sheepskin jacket. The sky was clear, and he was thankful for the passage of the monsoon-like rains which had inundated the Sierras during the past few days.

He swung up into the driver's seat. The cab was still warm from his trip from Grants Pass, and the diesel turned over immediately. He let the engine idle for a moment, shifted into the first of twelve forward gears, turned on his blinkers, and pulled out onto the deserted highway.

Flagg was thinking that he liked the dawn hours the best, the peace and stillness and solitude of a world awakening slowly, when the gun was jabbed against the nape of his neck.

He jerked involuntarily, and a voice said, "Easy. Just take it easy and don't ask questions."

Flagg moved on the seat, tensing. The gun pressed harder. "And don't try turning around." The voice was low, deep, calm.

Flagg let his muscles relax, concentrating on the road before him.

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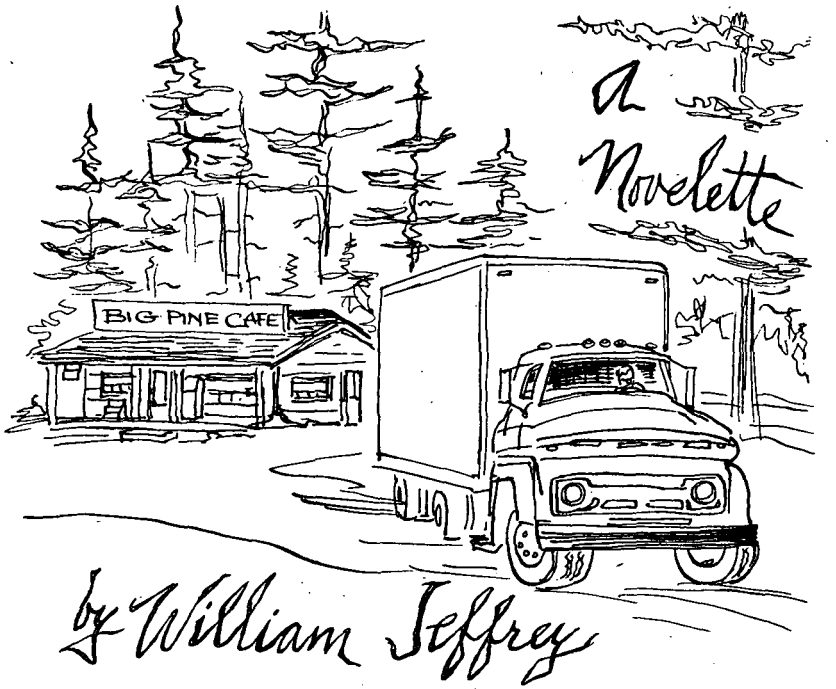

A Novelette

by William Jeffrey

Behind the seat was the small, curtained-off bunk used as a sleeper on long hauls. On shorter ones, it was used for storage, and Flagg had put a few things back there before leaving the DynaFreight yard in Grants Pass. The cafe had been his only stop since then, so the man had to have slipped into the cab while he'd been eating breakfast.

Shifting gears carefully, Flagg watched the tach as the grade of the highway suddenly steepened. A few miles beyond the cafe, there was a wide shoulder where trailers and trucks could pull over to allow strings of cars to pass. The hijacker said, "Park there."

Flagg downshifted, easing the diesel along the shoulder and off the highway as much as possible. He set the brakes. "Now what?" he asked, keeping both hands on the steering wheel.

"We wait," the hijacker told him.

They lapsed into a long moment of silence. Suddenly, a battered forest-green pickup pulled in front of the cab-over and stopped. Two men stepped out.

Flagg stared at the pickup, looking for anything peculiar which

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might later identify it from the thousands of decade-old half-tons in Oregon and California. He saw nothing. The rear license plate was mud-caked. The bed was empty, save for a set of ice-encrusted chains, and glistening wet; snow still clung to some of the shadowed corners.

The two men were mid-thirties, Flagg judged as they approached the diesel. Both wore nondescript tan work pants and heavy jackets. One wore a red hunting cap with the ear flaps pulled down. Each carried a rifle.

"Out," the man behind him ordered, jabbing him with the gun again.

Flagg opened the door and swung down. He saw that the two men carried their rifles in the crook of their arms; they were pros, all right, aware that they didn't have to level the weapons at him the entire time. If he tried to run, they would pick him off like a deer.

The man in the sleeper swung down behind Flagg. He had very bushy black eyebrows and a flattened-wide nose like an ex-pug's. He wore a scarred, brown leather bomber jacket, vintage World War II, and a leather cap. The gun was a large-bore automatic.

"No trouble," he said to the other two, in the same flat, bored voice he had used in the cab. Then he looked at Flagg almost disinterestedly and said, "Turn around, driver."

Flagg turned around, placing his hands on the frigid metal of the diesel's fender; he had no other choice. He tensed himself, knowing what was coming, and then he heard the soft rustling of the leather jacket—and his head exploded. The world turned licorice black, except for a startlingly bright light just ahead of his eyes, as though a flashbulb had suddenly gone off . . .

Flagg came out of it slowly. He was cold and wet, and when he got his eyes open and focused he saw that he'd been rolled off the shoulder of the road. His clothing was soaked through and caked with gray slush. There was no sign of the diesel.

He put a hand up carefully and explored the back of his head. There was a tender spot just over the right ear, and he could feel the blood that had dried there. There were swirling shadows at the corners of his eyes, and he wondered if he had a concussion.

Slowly, gingerly, he got to his feet. The sun, pale and hazy in the wintry sky, was up off the horizon in the east; he judged it was almost eight. He'd been unconscious a little more than an hour.

Somewhat unsteadily, he walked to the pavement. There was still very little traffic. He began to make

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his way in the direction of the Big Pine Cafe.

It took him the better part of an hour. He went inside and sat down at the counter and ordered a cup of coffee and a bowl of hot soup. The waitress looked at him curiously, but said nothing. He finished the liquid, and warmth began to flow through him again. He ordered more coffee, and when he was finished with that he went to the telephone booth at the rear of the cafe and called DynaFreight in Grants Pass.

Frank Northrup answered, and Flagg said, "Listen, this is Steve Davis. I've been hijacked a couple of miles from the Big Pine Cafe on 99. I'm calling from there now."

Northrup said several words, softly and vehemently. "They get the truck?"

"The whole damn works."

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"And you? Are you all right?"

"They clouted me on the head," Flagg said. "You want me to call the cops?"

"I guess you'd better."

"Will anybody be coming down?"

"I'm sure Mr. Villareal will be."

"Okay. I'll take a unit in the motel here."

"You don't have to do that."

"Well, I'd better," Flagg said. "I think I might have a concussion, and if that's the case I won't be in any shape to travel."

"We'll be in touch, Steve," Northrup said.

Flagg hung up, found another dime, and put through a long-distance collect call to his boss in San Francisco. Churlak was home. Flagg said, "I just got hit."

"Where?"

"Up in the Sierras, in the vicinity of the other two hijacks. They had a guy waiting in the sleeper compartment of the diesel when I came out of this Big Pine Cafe. There were two others in a ten-year-old green pickup tagging along behind, license plate muddied over. They sapped me and left."

"You okay?"

"I might have a concussion," Flagg said. "I'm going to go to a doctor."

"Do that," Churlak said. "What were you carrying?"

"Furniture," Flagg told him. "Semi-expensive stuff."

"You recognize any of the hijackers?"

"No."

"Anything at all?"

"I don't know," Flagg said. "I'm not thinking too clearly yet."

"Does Villareal know?"

"I called DynaFreight in Grants Pass and told the dispatcher about it. He'll tell Villareal. I didn't want to ask for him on something like this. It wouldn't have looked right."

"Okay," Churlak said. "You going back to Grants Pass after you see a doctor?"

"I don't think so. I'll stay around here for a day or so and see what I can come up with. They've got to be operating out of the area somewhere."

"Do you know where you'll be staying?"

"There's a motel next door to the Big Pine, and I'll get a unit there," Flagg said. "I'm going to need some wheels."

"Camper?"

"If you can manage it."

"No problem."

"I'll be in touch," Flagg said, and hung up.

He called the California State Highway Patrol, under whose jurisdiction the hijackers came, and told them what had happened and where he was. Then he went out

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and took a booth at the back of the cafe, under a large, suspended, unit heater. He was still cold and wet. He ordered more coffee and sat drinking it, waiting.

He thought about the hijackings. The one this morning of his truck made three now, all in less than a week. Each of the previous two trucks had been found empty and abandoned in different isolated locales, which pointed to the use of a large van to transport the goods to where they were being stored.

The hit just prior to this one, two days ago, had been of a load of television sets valued at around ten thousand. The first hit had been five days previous, of a semi carrying crates of light industrial machinery worth maybe eight or nine thousand; but that hadn't been all it had been carrying.

Ten crates had been dummies, and each of them had contained one million dollars in counterfeit twenties, fifties and hundreds; ten million dollars' worth of bogus United States currency earmarked for distribution to ten large cities along the DynaFreight route, one crate for each city.

The Organization owned controlling stock in DynaFreight, and used it as a holding company for tax purposes for the most part; but since the trucking concern was so large and operated nationwide, they also used it for periodic shipments of goods other than innocuous heavy freight. The counterfeit money was a prime example.

When that first hit was made, Churlak and the other top men on the West Coast had figured it for an inside job. John Villareal was the manager for DynaFreight out of Grants Pass, and an Organization man; so was Ben Lyons, his assistant. The two of them knew that the Organization was shipping the counterfeit with the industrial machinery—the only two, outside of a certain hierarchy on the Coast, who did know. It had figured to be one of those two who was pulling a large-scale, if foolish, double cross.

But then the second hijack happened, in the same general vicinity, and Churlak and the Organization weren't so sure. Maybe it was a gang of outsiders, an independent hijack ring which was after regular goods for black market distribution and happened to stumble blindly onto the ten million. It was possible, if all the cases hadn't been opened and checked, that they didn't even know what they had stolen.

So Churlak had called on Flagg, his troubleshooter, to go in undercover and see what he could find out. Churlak had had to tell Villareal about it, or else Flagg couldn't have gotten the job or the run he'd

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wanted; but if it wasn't an outside gang and Villareal was the one behind it all, Villareal still couldn't do anything. One move against Flagg, and the Organization would know he was their man. That included getting him conveniently killed on a hijack like the one this morning.

This third hit, however, tended to indicate that it *was* an outside group responsible and not one of the inner circle. A gang, not knowing what they'd stumbled upon, would keep right on hitting DynaFreight trucks until they thought it wasn't safe any longer; they'd pulled each hijack in a different manner, thus avoiding traps or stakeouts.

Flagg's reverie was interrupted by the arrival of the Highway Patrol. It was shortly past nine. They took him immediately in a patrol cruiser to the nearest town, where he was treated and X-rayed at the local clinic. All the while, and on the drive back, he was questioned extensively. Flagg was responsive and helpful, but there wasn't much he could tell them. He signed a report at a nearby substation, and after that they took him back to the motel adjacent to the Big Pine Cafe.

He rented a single, stripped and showered, and went to bed. His head still throbbed, but the doctor at the clinic hadn't found signs of the concussion he had feared; he had given Flagg some pills for the pain. The pills put him to sleep almost at once.

He was awakened by a persistent knocking on the door. He blinked rapidly several times, and found that his headache was gone. He got out of bed and went to the door and let in John Villareal, who settled himself in the room's one chair. Flagg sat down on the bed.

"What happened?" Villareal asked, and Flagg told him. Villareal sat listening stone-faced to the account, a solid block of a man in his early sixties with small, piercing blue eyes, a catfish mouth, and cropped white hair. He wore work clothes, shirt open at the throat, the one concession to his position a wrinkled sports coat. He was sharp and shrewd, according to the reports Flagg had; a long-term Organization man.

When Flagg had finished, Villareal said, "So those are the facts. What's your opinion?"

"The men knew what they were doing," Flagg replied. "It almost seems as though they were working beneath their ability, hijacking a load of furniture."

"Then you think they were after more money?"

"Maybe," Flagg said.

"What else could it be?"

"Window dressing," Flagg said.

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"You can't figure it for an inside job!"

"I've got an open mind."

"I can tell you right now, Flagg, there's no traitor at my end of things."

"Let's hope not," Flagg told him.

There was another knock on the door. Frowning, Villareal reached over and opened it. A well-dressed man Flagg had never seen before entered. He glanced at Villareal, then said to Flagg, "You Steve Davis?"

"Yes."

The man tossed a set of car keys, which Flagg fielded with his right hand. "Camper's right outside, fully equipped, including chains. Any message?"

"No."

The man nodded and backed out of the door, closing it behind him. Momentarily, there was the soft sound of a car pulling away.

"Who was that?" Villareal asked.

"Delivery boy." Flagg began to dress.

"You planning to stay on here?"

Flagg nodded. "I want to look around."

"What the hell, then I'll stay, too. I'll call Grants Pass."

"Put me on sick leave while you're at it."

"All right."

When Flagg had finished dressing, he and Villareal walked outside together. They agreed to meet for supper at the Big Pine Cafe, if nothing came up in the interim; then Flagg went to inspect the vehicle Churlak had provided.

It was a new half-ton pickup with an aluminum camper attached to its bed. As promised, it was fully-stocked; there was even an AM-FM radio in the cab.

Flagg spent the remainder of the day cruising a wide radius, stopping at different small towns and settlements to ask bartenders, waitresses, and service station attendants if they had seen or knew of a green pickup, ten years old and battered, or a large van in the area. He learned nothing. At dusk, he drove back to the motel.

When he entered the Big Pine Cafe, there were two other men sitting in a rear booth with Villareal. One was Ben Lyons, DynaFreight's assistant manager, and the other was its dispatcher, Frank Northrup. Lyons was fortyish, an amused look in his eyes and a well-modulated tone to his voice, carrying a hint of condescension. Northrup was under thirty, blond, with a round face and freckles across his nose and cheeks; he had worked his way up to his current job in a very short time—a hustler.

Flagg sat down, keeping his face expressionless and his manner that of a rank-and-filer in the presence

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of brass. Northrup wanted to know how his head was, and Flagg told him it wasn't as serious as he had first thought.

"I didn't think so," Northrup said casually. "Saw you drive up just now, Steve. Nice camper you've got there."

"It's not mine," Flagg said. "My brother-in-law's. He lives over in Crescent City; letting me borrow it while I'm here."

"Some brother-in-law."

"Sure," Flagg said.

They ordered dinner, and a round of drinks. When the drinks came, Northrup stood up, excused himself, and headed for the men's room. As soon as he was out of hearing range, Lyons leaned across the table.

"John told me who you are, Flagg," he said.

Flagg gave Villareal a hard look, and the manager spread his hands apologetically. "I couldn't help it," he said. "Ben guessed the truth."

Lyons nodded. "Two hijackings, and suddenly we put a new driver on the 99 run. It was too much coincidence; I've been around too long not to figure out what was happening. I went to John, and he had to admit it."

Flagg thought that Villareal didn't have to admit any damned thing at all. He said to him, "Who else knows?"

"Nobody," Villareal answered.

Flagg asked Lyons, "What are you doing here? And why did you bring Northrup with you?"

"I came down because I'm as concerned as John about these hijackings," Lyons said. He kept his voice soft, glancing in the direction of the rest rooms as he spoke. "And I brought Northrup along so I could keep an eye on him. As John says, there's a chance that the cargo's being spotted by someone on the inside, someone who wouldn't know about the currency but who *would* be able to tell the independents which legitimate hauls are valuable and when they're going out. That batch of furniture you were carrying today, Flagg, is good for eight, maybe ten thousand on the 'market'."

Villareal frowned. "You think Northrup's spotting us, Ben?"

"Well, he's been with us the shortest time. And I've run across him some places around the yard where a dispatcher has no call to be. He's always had a ready excuse, but damn it, he's just too much of an eager beaver—always asking questions, always hustling."

Flagg said, "What was his reaction when you asked him along?"

"Eager," Lyons answered.

"That's still no proof, Ben," Villareal said. "Have you got anything concrete to go on?"

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"No, nothing. But I want him handy when we get to the bottom of this thing, just the same. We'll be staying until you go back to Grants Pass tomorrow night, John. I—" he abruptly ended his last remark as Northrup came back to the table.

They had dinner in relative silence and went their separate ways as soon as it was over. Flagg returned to his room at the motel and lay down on the bed, thinking. The possibility of Northrup being involved with the hijackers was a new angle, and one that might bear some checking out. He would have to look into it when he got back to Grants Pass, if nothing developed here.

He stared at the soft, diffused square of light coming through the curtains and went over in his mind again the events of the hijacking that morning. He was looking for some clue, some lead that he might have noted at the time and forgotten. The more he thought, the more restless he became, as if there were something he had seen, or heard, and which was now filed away in his subconscious mind; something which stubbornly refused to come to the surface.

When he tried to sleep, it was no good. He would doze for a few minutes, then snap fitfully awake with his mind clear and alert—and yet the thing which was nagging him would not come out into the open.

It was past dawn and Flagg was under the shower when it finally broke through—something he had heard, *and* something he had seen.

The messenger who had brought the camper from Churlak had mentioned the standard inclusion of chains; but he hadn't needed them on his trips into the surrounding area the day before. And yet, there had been a freshly used set, still encrusted with ice, in the bed of the hijackers' green pickup truck . . .

Flagg used the room's phone to call the weather bureaus in Redding and Grants Pass, and triple-checked with the road reporter at the Highway Patrol substation in Yreka. He learned that the storm of the past few days had dumped snow intermittently on its way down from Canada, and while most of the immediate area had received torrential rain and wind, there was one section of the Klamath Mountains which had had blizzard conditions. More importantly, Highway 32 through that area was the only one requiring chains. Flagg dressed hurriedly and left the motel.

Highway 32 ran between Yreka, on U.S. 99, and the Pacific Ocean—a corkscrew of a road passing over 8000-foot elevations. Seventy-five miles to the south was another highway connecting Redding to the coast, and double that distance to

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the north was 199, between Grants Pass and Crescent City. It had to be Route 32, all right; the hijackers had either come from one of the towns along it, or from farther back in the mountains, where summer cabins nestled.

Chain requirements were still in effect on Highway 32, and at the 3500-foot level Flagg was forced to put on the camper's set. Then he continued, the heater on high, watching both snow-banked shoulders of the road. He knew the hijackers had used a truck either of the same size or larger than the cab-over he'd been driving, owing to the abandonment of the two previous DynaFreight diesels and, by this time, of his truck as well. The hijackers' truck would have left a set of tire tracks wide and deep if it turned off anywhere, since secondary roads were seldom traveled in the winter and therefore were covered with powdery snow.

He checked the towns of Silverpeak and Lovelock in passing, but no one remembered either seeing or hearing of a large truck in the vicinity. He stopped at Fort Rock for a quick meal, wondering perfunctorily if he were being missed by Villareal or the others, and then went on.

Five miles past Fort Rock, his theory paid off.

A developer had opened a flat meadow for vacation cabin sites. The field was under drifts of snow, but there was a large billboard by the entrance which guaranteed that the access roads to Spruce Hills were always open. The developer appeared to be true to his word; the main tract road was clear, with less than a foot of powder on its surface. The snow had been flattened considerably at the entrance by wide, double wheel tracks.

Flagg swung the camper off 32 and followed them. The tract road passed a number of darkened, deserted A-frame cottages, and the tracks led farther inland, up a steep grade and then down into a small valley. He stopped at the crest of the grade.

Below, less than a half-mile distant, were two A-frames set in a thick half-moon of blue spruce. A large van with a dented aluminum trailer was backed up to the front door of the much smaller one; a four-door sedan and the green pickup were parked in a V before the other. Smoke squirrel-tailed out of the stone chimney on the second structure.

Flagg sat there a moment, debating. Then he put the camper in reverse and backed to the nearest branch road. He drove along that for a short distance and parked the camper in front of a darkened cabin there. He got out and opened up

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the rear and found a pair of binoculars in one of the side cabinets. There was also a .38 Detective Special; he put that into his coat pocket.

The snow on the slope paralleling the road was relatively solid, and Flagg had little difficulty making his way to the crest. There, he squatted next to one of the scattered, white-mantled spruces and through the binoculars watched the twin A-frames and the surrounding terrain for a time. There was no sign of activity.

He put the binoculars back in their case and began to make his way down into the valley. He moved cautiously, using the spruce trees for cover whenever he could and keeping well to the rear of the A-frames in a diagonal trajectory. Ten minutes later he was crouched in the protective shelter of the evergreens less than fifteen feet from the rear of the smaller A-frame.

He heard nothing peculiar, saw nothing at all. Finally he straightened and ran to the rear wall of the A-frame, leaning against the rough boarding next to the single window there.

The panes of glass were rimed with snow, and he used the palm of his gloved hand to clear a circle. There were muslin curtains drawn inside, though not fitted completely together; there was enough of a gap to allow Flagg to see into the darkened interior. He was able to distinguish a stack of cordwood against one wall—and the dark, squarish outlines of several crates, stacked side by side and on top of one another.

Flagg looked at the window catch and decided he could jimmy it with a minimum of noise. He got out the multi-bladed knife he carried and used one blade, and then another, and he had the window sliding slowly upward less than two minutes later.

He swung up and over the sill and lowered himself to the floor inside, listening, his muscles corded. No sounds; however many men were in the immediate vicinity, all of them were in the second A-frame.

He closed the window, switched on his pocket flash, and let the beam probe the markings on the various crates. He had to know if the counterfeit money was being kept here, with the rest of the goods, or if it had been removed to another location; if the latter were true, then the hijackers had to have found out what they had really gotten—or had known it from the beginning.

Carefully, Flagg checked each of the crates stacked in the otherwise unfurnished interior. There was no sign of the ten coded boxes which

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contained the mob's bogus currency.

He was starting for the window again when he heard the key scrape in the front door lock.

Quickly, he switched off the flash. The key scraped again. Flagg moved behind one of the crates, blending with its shadows. A triangle of light appeared on the floor inside as the door was opened and then vanished as the door was closed again. An overhead light clicked on, flooding the room with pale illumination.

Flagg tensed, waiting. A single set of footsteps advanced across the floor, moving in unbroken cadence; whoever it was seemed not to suspect anything wrong.

A booted leg appeared in Flagg's vision, and he levered up in that instant with his right arm hooked into a stiff plane, out and away from his body, the fingers rigidly extended. He stepped directly into the advancing man and jammed the stiffened fingers under the relaxed wishbone, pulling the force somewhat so as not to rupture the heart. There was a surprised and agonized explosion of breath, and the man went down as if he had been pole-axed. Flagg caught him before he hit the floor and propped him up against the nearest crate. It was the driver of the green pickup.

Flagg searched him; he wasn't carrying a weapon. Then he went over to the window, opened it again, and scraped a handful of snow off the sill. He rubbed it over the hijacker's slack features, let some of it trickle inside the collar of the heavy fur parka the man wore. After a moment, the hijacker began to moan softly and his eyes fluttered open.

Flagg was holding the .38 Special in his right hand. He said, "Quiet, now. Nice and quiet."

The man looked at him, and then he looked at the gun. There was fear plainly evident in his pain-washed eyes.

"How many men here besides yourself?" Flagg asked him.

Lips worked for a long moment before words came. Then, "Three."

"What are they doing?"

"Eating lunch."

"Are they armed?"

"No."

"Where are all the guns?"

"In a cabinet in the front room."

"Locked?"

"Yeah."

"And all the guns are in there?"

"All of them, yeah."

"Why did you come out here?"

"To get some firewood."

"All right," Flagg said. "Get on your feet."

The man stood, painfully, his right hand pressed to the area under his wishbone. Flagg prodded him to the door. Pausing there, he

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asked, "Can they see this A-frame from where they're eating?"

"No. The window is curtained."

"Let's go," Flagg said.

They went out into the snow-packed area fronting the two structures, skirting the van and following a path to the front door. Once there, Flagg breathed, "Open it."

The hijacker reached out and clicked the door open. Flagg shoved him unceremoniously forward and the door flew inward, slamming against the inside wall with a sharp reverberation. The hijacker went stumbling onto his knees in the middle of the room.

Flagg stood framed in the doorway with the .38 Special sweeping the interior. "As you were," he said.

The three men around a long wooden table near the stone fireplace seemed frozen into shocked immobility. The pair on one end were the remaining two-thirds of the hijacking team; the other man, whose face was blanched a sickly white, was equally recognizable to Flagg.

He said, "Hello, Ben."

Ben Lyons came out of his chair. His eyes no longer carried their amused look, and when he spoke, his normally modulated voice was on the verge of cracking into shrill fragments. He said, "Listen . . . listen, Flagg, I can explain this, I can explain . . ."

"Sure you can, Ben," Flagg said. He glanced around the spacious, well-furnished room, noting the locked gun cabinet as he did. "Nice place you've got here. It *is* yours, isn't it?"

"Flagg . . ."

"Lucky thing I caught you home," Flagg said pleasantly. "It makes things much simpler. How'd you get here, Ben? I didn't see your car. One of the boys pick you up someplace?"

Lyons' shoulders began to sag; he knew that there was no use in trying to bluff his way out now.

"Why'd you come up here today, Ben? To make sure everything was running smoothly? To have a look at the money?" Flagg let the smile die on his lips. "Where *is* the money, Ben?"

"We can make a deal," Lyons said. "There's enough there for all of us, Flagg. Ten million dollars. How much do you want? Just name it. Three million? Five?"

"The money, Ben," Flagg said softly. "I don't want to have to ask you again."

Lyons' eyes searched Flagg's face, looking for an opening, an out, and finding none at all. His gaze dipped to the gun, and Flagg let his finger whiten on the trigger. Lyons took a half-stumbling step backward, putting up his right hand with the palm turned outward as if

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to ward off an impending bullet. "In the storeroom! Over there!"

Flagg saw that he was indicating a closed and barred door on the opposite side of the room. He backed over there, not taking his eyes off the four men. He reached behind him, lifted the crossbar off, and pulled the door open wide; then he moved away from it, to where he could see inside the storeroom. It was little more than a cubicle, barren save for some boxes of foodstuffs—and the ten coded crates of counterfeit currency. He noted that there were no windows, and that the door was constructed of solid redwood.

He said, "Into the storeroom, all of you."

They obeyed without hesitation, and Flagg had two of the hijackers remove the lids on a pair of the crates. The money was there, all right.

Flagg told them to tighten the lids down again. When they had done that, he had the four of them carry the ten crates outside and load them in the bed of the green pickup, two on each crate, five trips. Then he herded them back inside and into the storeroom again.

Lyons, with his back to the far wall, asked in a tremulous voice, "What—what are you going to do?"

"What do you think, Ben?"

"You can't kill us! Flagg, for the love of—! Think about it, Flagg!"

"Stop being melodramatic, Ben," Flagg said. "Things aren't done that way these days." He smiled faintly. "What I'm going to do is lock you in here and call the Highway Patrol anonymously, with a tip on where they can find the men who've been doing the DynaFreight hijackings. All the goods are in the other A-frame, and the van and the pickup will be nearby. That's all the evidence they're going to need."

Lyons tried to say something in a whimpering voice. Flagg told him to shut up. "You were a damned fool to think you could cross the Organization," he said. "Even for *twenty* million, it wouldn't have been worth it."

"I've got a good record!" Lyons pleaded. "I . . . I just lost my head. Give me a break, will you?"

"You're getting off plenty lucky as it is, Ben," Flagg told him. "Ten years, maybe, if you keep your mouth shut about the DynaFreight operation. If you don't, the Organization will see to it that ten years is made into twenty, or thirty, or maybe more. There are any number of ways to do that."

Lyons subsided, still whimpering. He looked old and haggard, a deflated, hollow man—a man whose one big gamble had blown up in his face.

Flagg said to the three hijackers,

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"The same goes for you. Keep your mouths shut, and you won't come out of this with more than a slap on the wrist and a nice lesson."

"We never even heard of any Organization, mister," one of the hijackers said.

Flagg smiled. "That's fine." And to Lyons, "So long, Ben. I understand San Quentin isn't such a bad place, as prisons go."

He shut the door and dropped the heavy wooden crossbar into place. They wouldn't be getting out of there until they were let out.

Flagg went outside, found the keys in the ignition of the pickup, and drove it to the branch road where he had left the camper. The area was still deserted. He backed the pickup to the rear of the other vehicle and managed to transfer the heavy crates to the camper. Then he swung the pickup around and out of the way, removing the keys from the ignition and putting them under the floor mat. He took the camper back onto the development road, turning toward Fort Rock.

As he drove, he thought that he had not been particularly surprised to learn that Ben Lyons was behind the hijackings. He hadn't been necessarily suspicious of the man, but Lyons was an obvious choice from the beginning because of his position inside DynaFreight, his knowledge of the money shipment.

The reason for the heist of the second truck immediately after the first was, of course, to make it look as though the thieves were lucky independents, originally after no more than the legitimate goods. The third hijacking was strictly for Flagg's benefit. Lyons was aware of Flagg's identity—even though he had guessed the truth, Churlak would undoubtedly be speaking to Villareal about confirming it so readily—and he had purposely had Flagg heisted to convince him of the theory of an outside gang. Since there was suspicion of an internal leak, Lyons had thrown in the red herring of Northrup, DynaFreight's overly eager dispatcher.

Flagg felt a certain sense of well-being. He had accomplished his mission neatly and quickly and completely, with no hint of publicity for the Organization. He settled back and turned on the AM-FM radio. He would stop in Fort Rock long enough to call the Highway Patrol, and then Churlak for instructions on where to drop the counterfeit. With a little luck, he would be back in San Francisco by nightfall . . .

The AM stations on the radio were static-filled and too weak to be heard because of the mountains, and Flagg switched to FM. He went to the end of the dial, started back the other way—and suddenly

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the cab was filled with a loud, high-pitched squeal. He turned the volume down quickly and stared at the dial: 108.6—where there was no station in the area. A frigid, clammy feeling settled between Flagg's shoulder blades.

There was only one explanation for the squeal: a homing device had been planted somewhere in the camper, and its transmission signal was being picked up by the FM radio. It hadn't been there the previous afternoon, because Flagg had tried out the radio during his abortive checking of the small towns in the area; that meant it had to have been installed last night, after he had returned to the motel. It had been continuously transmitting a piercing FM call to some local receiver ever since he'd left that morning, pinpointing the location of the camper, where it had been, where it was heading. The implications of such a device started Flagg sweating. Who? Not Lyons, or else he wouldn't have been so surprised at the A-frame. Who, then, damn it—and *why*?

His foot bore down on the camper's accelerator. The transmitter would not be much good over a fifteen mile or so radius; whoever was tailing him must be close by—and he had ten million in counterfeit bills aboard. He had to reach Fort Rock, find the homer, and get the hell out of the area before he, they, whoever was back there, realized what was happening.

Beads of sweat laced his forehead and cheeks when he entered the small settlement. He pulled into the first service station he saw off Highway 32, and stopped in front of the rest rooms.

It took him twenty minutes of feverish searching to locate the transmitter.

It was tucked behind the right rear fender, attached to the frame by a bar magnet. Flagg ripped it loose, debated dumping it in the trash barrel outside the rest rooms, and then saw for the first time that there was a supermarket adjacent to the station. The supermarket had a half-filled parking lot, and that gave him an idea; instead of leaving the bug here, he would attach it to some housewife's car, leading his followers on a wild-goose chase and giving him a misdirection as well as precious time.

He vaulted the low brick wall between the station and the supermarket lot and ran to a near group of cars. A woman was just reversing out of a space there. Flagg walked behind her. She braked courteously, and he dropped the transmitter on the sheet metal shelf between the body and bumper of her small foreign car.

He pivoted left then, walking be-

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tween two other parked cars to make a circuit back to the camper. As he did so, his eyes fell on the service station lot; he went instinctively to one knee by the fender of the car on his left.

Two black-and-white Highway Patrol cruisers were pulling onto the macadam behind the camper.

Flagg clamped his teeth tightly together as the two cruisers stopped and several khaki-uniformed officers jumped out with drawn revolvers. They circled the camper, pulling open the cab doors, the rear door.

In that moment, another car pulled into the station. It was black, unmarked, containing two men. The car rocked to a halt and the two men came out running.

One of them was Frank Northrup, the DynaFreight dispatcher—and it was plainly evident that he was in charge.

He called the Highway Patrolmen together, waving his arms and relaying hurried instructions. Flagg did not wait any longer. He eased around the front of the car on his right, still in a low crouch, and ran quickly along the line to the rear of the lot, where it curved around behind the supermarket. There, he began to look into the windows of the scattered cars. Finally, he found a new one that had the keys in the ignition.

He slipped inside. There was a slouch rain hat on the front seat, and he pulled it low over his forehead before he started the engine. He drove out of the rear entrance of the lot, not looking back, and followed several side streets to where they ultimately connected with Highway 32. He turned west, toward 99, without pursuit.

He forced himself to drive slowly, even though his chest was tightly constricted with urgency. With any luck, he could make it fifteen or twenty miles from Fort Rock before the owner of the car realized it had been stolen. He would catch a bus or a ride in one of the other small towns in the area—or if necessary, he would steal another car.

As he drove, he knew what had happened as clearly as if he had been watching it on a movie screen. Northrup had been a ringer—a Treasury or FBI agent planted with DynaFreight to listen and to observe. That meant that the Feds had to have somehow gotten wind of the Organization's use of the trucking company to haul counterfeit money and other illegal commodities. The whole operation was blown.

Northrup might not have known that the recent ten million dollar shipment had been among the hijacked load of furniture, but he

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would certainly have suspected it, especially with the sudden appearance on the scene of Flagg. Northrup, being a trained agent, must have suspected Flagg of being just what he was: an Organization troubleshooter, sent to DynaFreight to find out who was behind the hijackings and to recover the counterfeit. When Lyons had offered to bring him along on this third heist—this time of the troubleshooter himself—Northrup would have readily agreed; and when he had seen Flagg canvassing the area in a new camper that had magically appeared at the Big Pine Cafe and Motel, his suspicions would have been confirmed.

So he had bugged the camper, figuring that if Flagg found out where the counterfeit was before he did, it would serve the government's purpose just as well as if he had uncovered it himself.

Well, Flagg had handed them the ten million on a silver platter, all right. And he had led them to the hijackers, and Ben Lyons, in the bargain. They would have moved in on the A-frames as soon as Flagg left, and when they had found Lyons and the others—and no sign of the counterfeit—they had known it was time to close in on Flagg. He'd been damned lucky to get away at all.

But it hadn't been his fault. How could he have known the camper was bugged? How could he even have *suspected* it? Churlak would understand that it wasn't his fault the Feds had got the bogus currency, Flagg thought grimly.

He *hoped* Churlak would understand . . .

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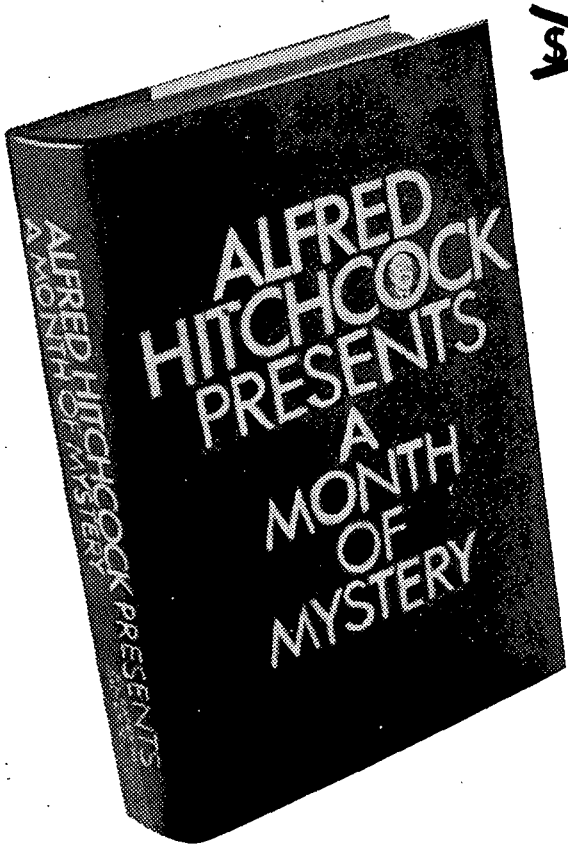

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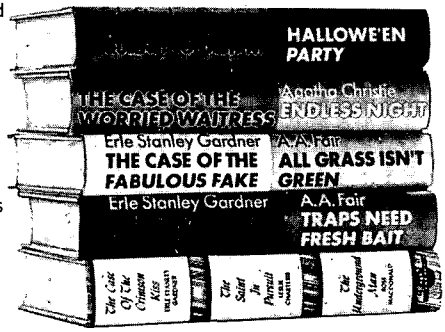

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